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Abstract
This thesis explores the relationship of voice, language, and politics in Italian musical history. I do this through a double geographical and chronological lens: first, the city of Milan, a powerful political and cultural interface between Italy and Central Europe; secondly, the years 1955-1974, key decades in the constitution of Italy’s first democratic government and years of vertiginous anthropological changes across the peninsula. Across the four chapters of my thesis, I sketch a heterogeneous and thickly populated network of musical activities—ranging from high-modernist tape music to opera, neofolk records, to pop hits. I argue the musical production for voice of this time expresses long-standing anxieties about speech and communication through the recurring use of nonsense languages, distorted recorded speech, and para-linguistic phenomena such as laughter as musical materials. The root of these anxieties lies in a version of Italy’s five-century-old language question—the question of Italy’s absent common tongue—and at the same time, a European Enlightenment tradition that sets Italy as the southern land of the beautiful voice, and yet also ineffective policies and underdeveloped language faculties. What is at stake in the musical and vocal production of 1950s and 1970s Milan, then, is a potential philosophy of the voice as neither aesthetic excess nor as carrier of language, but as an unresolved multiplicity of articulations, languages, and political subjectivities.

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CROWDED VOICE: SPEECH, MUSIC AND COMMUNITY IN MILAN, 1955-1974

Delia Casadei

A DISSERTATION

in

Music

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2015

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sine quibus non for whatever good bits are contained in what follows. To them I dedicate
this dissertation, with gratitude and love.
ABSTRACT

CROWDED VOICE: SPEECH, MUSIC, AND COMMUNITY IN MILAN, 1955-1974

Delia Casadei

Jairo Moreno

This thesis explores the relationship of voice, language, and politics in Italian musical history. I do this through a double geographical and chronological lens: first, the city of Milan, a powerful political and cultural interface between Italy and Central Europe; secondly, the years 1955-1974, key decades in the constitution of Italy’s first democratic government and years of vertiginous anthropological changes across the peninsula. Across the four chapters of my thesis, I sketch a heterogeneous and thickly populated network of musical activities—ranging from high-modernist tape music to opera, neofolk records, to pop hits. I argue the musical production for voice of this time expresses long-standing anxieties about speech and communication through the recurring use of nonsense languages, distorted recorded speech, and para-linguistic phenomena such as laughter as musical materials. The root of these anxieties lies in a version of Italy’s five-century-old language question—the question of Italy’s absent common tongue—and at the same time, a European Enlightenment tradition that sets Italy as the southern land of the beautiful voice, and yet also a site of ineffective policies and underdeveloped language faculties. What is at stake in the musical and vocal production of 1950s and 1970s Milan, then, is a potential philosophy of the voice as neither aesthetic excess nor as carrier of language, but as an unresolved multiplicity of articulations, languages, and political subjectivities.
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…Milan—Say What?

Let’s begin with a voice—a silly, but far from meaningless voice—well-rooted in the collective memory of my generation. Among the voices many of us grew up with through mass entertainment, Pingu’s has to be one of the most recognizable. Grafted by voice actor Carlo (Carletto) Bonomi onto a Swiss clay-animated penguin figure, it is a nasal, pleasantly high-pitched and childlike voice, with one key attraction and—to the many national broadcasters who purchased *Pingu* between 1986 and 2000 as part of their mainstay programming—a unique selling point: it speaks a made-up language (“penguinese”) that skillfully splices phonetic markers of various Western-European languages but never amounts to semantics, allowing for consumption across linguistic boundaries without the added cost of dubbing.

Pingu’s voice—or rather, his non-semantic speech—became a popular international product in the 1980s, and because those who know it came to it through their own local blends of children programs in the 1990s, we don’t think of it—and certainly don’t hear it—as a voice having roots in a specific place. In fact, this is a voice that germinated some thirty years prior in Italy, and not just anywhere, but in the city of Milan, where it came to haunt a variety of bodies natural and politic. I mean this literally: not only was voice actor Carlo Bonomi a born and bred Milanese, and had cut his teeth in the 1950s in a circuit of actors with close links to the early days of nation-wide TV broadcasting (whose point of origin was Milan); but anyone who travelled from or to Milan’s Stazione Centrale between 1985 and 2008—a stretch of time that almost
completely overlaps with Bonomi’s voice-work on Pingu—will have heard his voice, now about two octaves lower than Pingu’s and speaking in professionally well-enunciated Italian—over the loudspeaker announcements.

Beyond the delight of imagining the physical co-habitation of these two characters into a single human body (what would happen if Pingu’s voice announced our train?) what I am getting at is a working hypothesis in the relationship between voice, language, and geopolitics. Why did the Milanese city council and railway executives pick Bonomi as their announcer, when virtually all of his work between the 1950s and the 1980s consisted of high-pitched, infantilized and nonsensical voices? Sure, having a voice-actor whose speaking voice would not be recognizable might make for less distracting announcements. More importantly for city planners, perhaps, Bonomi’s career was tied—because of his work with voices in tv ads—to Milan’s burgeoning wealth and prestige in the 1960s, a time that would be recalled with almost myth-worthy awe by century’s end as the “economic miracle.”

But at the level of the speaking voice, its articulation, and aural effect, the choice of Bonomi makes far more practical sense. After all, anyone who’s been in a large site of public transit knows that the voices on the loudspeakers can be—depending on where one’s standing, and on the building’s acoustics—maddeningly difficult to parse into words. Milan’s Railway station—a fascist-era, high-vaulted marble and concrete monstrosity—is no exception. One has to wonder if the function of the vocal announcements, more than relaying information that—it may be assumed—most travellers will be able to gather from screens and boards, is to have the ability to dart in
and out of earshot, and also in and out of semantics, without losing the affect of limpid communication. We must never doubt that what we hear makes perfect sense, although it rarely makes sense to us—just as Pingu’s speech is, we must assume, a functional mother tongue for the cartoon’s characters, and gibberish only to us. Pingu’s voice and the train announcement voice are, after all, one and the same. We might assume that Bonomi’s voices are perfect for train announcements in a place that has become unusually aware of the pervasive presence of the non-semantic while, at the same time, developing the habit of infusing the potentiality for sense in all manners of aural experience. Carlo Bonomi’s voices—Pingu and the Railway announcements—can, in other words, become for us the entry point into a symptomatology of Milanese “audile techniques” for attending to language, but also for producing music.¹

I began working on this dissertation by gathering a constellation of musical phenomena, all centered in Milan, whose common denominator is the insistent presence of a speaking voice in which semantics have been obscured, but not eliminated or overcome. Mishearings, nonsense languages, speech malfunctions, glitches and workings of recording technologies. The first thing I picked up—as a reformed composer whose scholarly leanings are decidedly towards the twentieth-century—was the existence, and early output of Milan’s Studio di Fonologia (founded 1955; closed 1983), the belated Italian answer to the crop of Central European and American electronic music studios that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s. A studio dedicated primarily to the relationship of voice and language through music, it is known in the Anglophone world chiefly for being

the site of production of the composition *Visage* (1961) by a soon-to-be titan of Italian modernism, Luciano Berio, the studio’s co-founder with fellow titan Bruno Maderna. In *Visage*, singer Cathy Berberian sighs, groans, and chirps her way into speech with such sensuous abandon as to fall into the radar of the national network’s Christian Democrat censors and be taken off air. This most celebrated item of Italian musical modernism is flanked, to my ears, by another of Milan’s highly prestigious cultural exports: 1997 Nobel laureate Dario Fo’s *Mistero buffo* (1969), a theatrical monologue in grammelot, a made-up language inspired by the prosody of Lombard languages. Fo’s piece, a left-wing compensatory oral history of the Italian subaltern in the middle ages, is no less obscene than *Visage*. In its opening gambit, Zanni, a rambunctious impoverished peasant delirious with hunger, proceeds to eat himself piece by piece with live commentary. He reaches down his own throat to pull out the intestines, squeezes out the feces, devours them along with all his limbs, and leaves his own speaking mouth for last. And moving away from the echelons of high modernism and *engagé* theatre, I began to discover (or re-discover in a new light) other items, such as Adriano Celentano’s pop hit *Prisenconlinensinainciusol* (1972), a Anglophone nonsense-language rap over an irresistibly funky E flat groove and horn riff. *Prisen* had reached the top of European and American charts in 1974-5 and enjoyed a surge of interest in the American press, blogosphere and social networks in the fall of 2009, just as I began my days as a graduate student at UPenn. (Back then, the circulation of the video of the song on youtube, often re-labeled by American commentators with phrases like “this is what English sounds like to Italians,” vaguely discomforted me, though I could not produce a satisfying answer as to why).
As I began excavating the networks of people, institutions, and political beliefs generated by—and generative of—this first crop of phenomena—I also noticed that my first three sets of musical coordinates (Berio—1963—Visage/Fo—1969—Mistero Buffo/Celentano—1972—Prisen) were all prestigious, smooth-surfaced exports whose conditions of production in Milan spoke, in each case, of failures, ruptures and tense political conditions. These languages without semantics, which were, and still are enthusiastically received abroad as fascinating excesses of linguistic invention, partake of the prestige of a long tradition of Italianate vocality, which in turn acts as a symbolic guarantor of quality for their export. Yet within Milan itself, these same pieces and performances were controversial because of their flaunting of a lack of logos that was heard—whether in the context of national radio broadcasting, or left-wing musical activism, or representations of race in popular culture—as politically untoward. There is, I began to suspect, an implicit geopolitics to the determination of these voices as lack or excess: what seemed at play here, in other words, was a historically and politically heightened acuity for voice that pertained to Milan as the national symbol and international exporter of Italian “modernity” in the second half of the twentieth century.

What did these artists want with language—and what had their work to do with Milan not only in an institutional and cultural sense, but also with regard to the symbolic role of the city both in Europe and within Italy? And what did I, as a musicologist, want with language? How could I go about writing a history of music from within a material history of languages, a history that joins sound and politics by traversing, rather than circumventing, the diaphragm of speech?
More than One Voice, Fewer than One

Another way of thinking about Bonomi’s voices would be to relate them to the idea of “more than one voice”—the expression and celebrated title of a book published in 2003 by Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero. Cavarero checks the entire Western tradition for tethering voice to language and thus smothering another voice—material, non-linguistic, positive, and feminine. This voice, she says, is proper to she who utters it: unique, like sonorous DNA, and inalienable; but it is overlooked because of the voice of logos, a voice that works as a diaphanous vessel for language and can’t be thought separately from it. Cavarero urges us to hear more than that logo-centered voice, tuning into this other, more radical sounding of selfhood and identity.

I am drawn to think of Cavarero because Bonomi certainly has more than one voice, and his professional ability to produce nonsensical voices allows him to conjure voices that are material, non-semantic, unshackled from signifiers, and, we should note, always within the feminine range. But despite the beauty of Cavarero’s nomenclature, the juxtaposition with Bonomi produces a series of clashes. I just cannot imagine any of Bonomi’s voices as the marker of his true identity. In fact, what interests me about these voices gathered into a single body is that they give the lie to the idea of an univocal correspondence between voices and bodies. I understand Bonomi’s talent, his proper gift,

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as not having one true voice, the ability to turn his sonorous self inside out for the common taking.

This also means that his voices together do not coalesce into a whole, a multifaceted but cogent speaking subject. If Bonomi has more than one voice then he also, strictly speaking, has fewer than one, because no voice amounts to the initial, carnal identity upon which the other voices can pile up, as add-ons. This is what I would call a crowded voice, a voice that amounts to an unresolved multiplicity of articulations, languages, political subjectivities. This is the idea which I have come to hear in wide-ranging phenomena, from electroacoustic interpretations of Joyce to accounts of the sonic impact of southern immigrants into Milan; from theatrical adaptations of Hölderlin, to certain bursts of laughter, to recorded riots, and to nonsense pop songs.

But I am now myself speaking in the voice—or through my understanding of—yet another Italian theorist, this time not of the voice but of community: Roberto Esposito, whose *Communitas* (1998) and later work, specifically on the question of Italian political identity, inspired my thinking and writing at many turns. Perhaps because—as I inch towards the geopolitical kernel of my dissertation—I worry about my thought slipping into identity politics, the ideas of these two Italian thinkers often run in parallel in my mind. What is at stake politically between Cavarero’s philosophy of the voice and Esposito’s political thought is the basic definition of what makes a community. Cavarero is imagining an alternative feminist community based on the carnal identitarian qualities of the voices who belong to it; Esposito argues—in strong contrast with most philosophies of community in the West—that communities are not formed around a
common property, but rather around a *munus* which is a gift but also a duty and a debt, something that cuts us, makes us incomplete and turned towards the outside.

In the community, subjects do not find a principle of identification nor an aseptic enclosure within which they can establish transparent communication or even a content to be communicated. They don’t find anything else except that void, that distance, that extraneousness that constitutes them as being missing from themselves [...] The community isn’t a mode of being, much less a “making” of the individual subject. It isn’t the subject’s expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject.³

What we conceive as most deeply proper to us—such as our voice—is in fact a gift received and an obligation to pay forward, something we can only access by giving it away. This is a particularly powerful tool for thinking about the geopolitics of a place, such as Italy, whose identity within the West has long been allied to a gift for voice and song. It fits the purposes of thinking this identity in relation to a city, such as Milan, that was the fulcrum of operatic production in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. We might rethink identity and its performance—particularly vocal performance—as the complex dynamics at play in the appraisal of *munus* both as that which one has been given, and as the shift or re-elaboration of this received good for the purposes of absolving one’s duty to pay it forward. What my *in vitro* musical history of Milan might suggest is that the nature of the *munus* that allows Italy to belong to Europe, and Milan to Italy, is language, and that the mode of this lack’s expression is the voice.

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Modernities and geopolitics

Both Milan as a site and the conceptual hinge of voice-language allow me to think of the ghosts of a European “modernity”—a term I use to outline a form of historical longing (a perceived lack, a gravitational force-field) that shapes the sensorium of certain places and groups of people. As sociolinguists Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs have argued, ideologies of language are one of the core elements of modernity.\(^4\) In the case of Italy’s path towards modernity, language was the hinge between sound and geopolitics. Long before Italy was unified under a single crown as a nation state in 1861, it had been gazed upon and heard by the French and German literati—from Montesquieu to Rousseau to Mme de Staël, to even Marx—as a place existing at the periphery of the European Republic of Letters.\(^5\) As Italian literature scholar Roberto Dainotto recently—

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\(^5\) The specific texts implied here are Charles de Montesquieu *De l’esprit de lois* (1748), Madame De Staël’s essay “Sulla maniera e l’utilità delle traduzioni,” *Biblioteca Italiana*, January 1816, 9-18, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues* (1781). I draw from the analyses of these authors by Roberto M. Dainotto in *Europe (In Theory)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), as well as from Gary Tomlinson’s analysis of De Staël in “Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera: An Essay in Their Affinities,” *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer, 1986), pp. 43-60. My observation on Marx derives from some of his journalistic comments on Italy’s wars of independence from Austria-Hungary in the 1850s, in which again the managing of voice as a resource and the capability for democratic government (and before that, for popular revolution) are evoked in the same, loaded sentence. See for instance his commentary of a failed Milanese riot piloted by Mazzini, then in exile in Switzerland, in 1953: “Has one ever heard of great improvisators being also great poets? They are the same in politics as in poetry. Revolutions are never made to order. After the terrible experience of ’48 and
and boldly—argued, Southern Europe, and Italy especially—served as a means of maintaining symbolic ties, and yet also substantially warding off the south-Eastern Mediterranean that was understood at once as a point of origin and as an embarrassing pre-modernity that need to be overcome. For Dainotto, it was Montesquieu who crystalized the thought that “as colonies of the Oriental world of Islam, the civilizations of Spain and Italy did not constitute an integral part of Europe but were its negative south.” Yet it was crucial that they were included—as the aestheticizing flair for voice that runs from Rousseau to De Staël shows—precisely because they served to render Europe *immune* to the South-Eastern and Islamic section of the Mediterranean by folding elements of it within its perimeter.

The political economy of the Italianate voice lies with the geopolitics of the European South, as an excess which bears an inextinguishable debt towards the Enlightened Northern Europe that begrudgingly includes it. It is key to remember that at least two of the writers tackled by Dainotto—Rousseau and De Staël—were the thinkers of the Italianate voice whose names haunt opera scholars’ bibliographies to this day. The beautiful orality of Italians, when approached and heard from France and Germany, implies an eschewal of, but also subjugation to the *lettres*, the literate thought that defines the Republic of European states. As Dainotto argues, literature—the very idea of *belles lettres*—come for the French Enlightenment to embody not simply the act of writing, but

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49, it needs something more than paper summonses from distant leaders to evoke national revolutions.” Karl Marx, untitled article in the *New York Herald Tribune*, 8 March 1853, available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/03/08.htm; visited 5 September 2015.

the very form of Enlightened logos as a political and intellectual practice. Taking Dainotto’s thought one step further towards the aural we might argue that the Italianate voice is primarily the by-product of, the lack/excess produced by, this European notion of the literate. Voice is the gift of the Italian peninsula, its contribution to the Republic of letters, but only in so far as it is also the sonic embodiment of that which Italy does not have, its debt to the superior literature, and superior ability for democratic state-building of its core-European siblings.

What interests me here is the incarnation that this ghost of a European modernity takes in the first decades of Italy’s life as a democratic republican government (Italy became a republic in 1948), at a crucial time of re-evaluation of Italy’s geopolitical significance within Europe and of the potential for functional democratic governance. My concern with the musical appropriations of the sounds of distorted or misheard speech finds its historical grounding in the late twentieth-century incarnation of the Italian “language question.” Centuries-old anxieties over the lack of a nationally spoken language (and the political consequences of linguistic fragmentation) had intensified into heated political debates by the second half of the twentieth century. At the dawn of its life as a democratic republic, Italy’s linguistic landscape was fragmented into a multitude of local dialects, a fact that impeded the formation of any sense of democratic consensus.

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7 Dainotto works through Voltaire and Diderot to come up with a definition of letters as “not literature as erudition, but literature as a key to practical knowledge; not literature as a cult of the past, but as praxis on the present and creation of a progressive future; not literature as knowledge for knowledge’s sake, in the end, but literature as the formation of citizens—of a society of polished spirits, perfect taste, and graceful sciences. This is literature, in sum, understood as the basis for the transnational Republic of Letters of poets, doctors, and mathematicians already praised in le siècle de Louis XIV.” Europe (In Theory), 90.
The peninsula’s long history as a disparate collection of independent kingdoms and other, smaller states made for a drastic regional variance among dialects, with people living fewer than a hundred miles apart being unable to converse in a common language; at the same time, the official national language remained, even a good decade into national radio broadcasting, a literary abstraction, one that—although incarnated into a broadcasted voice—remained alien to the speaking practices of most people. Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci famously diagnosed, in the 1920s, the conjunction of linguistic fragmentation and political failure in Italian history, particularly with relation to fascism. Gramsci had, however, conceived of the peninsula’s linguistic fragmentation largely by distinguishing between oral and literate cultures. This distinction is irrevocably blurred by midcentury, a time which recorded and broadcast speech rendered aural some of the tensions previously conceived of as between literate/oral culture. The conception of matters of language at the level of sound is—I argue—one of the distinctive traits of 1950s and early 60s Milanese culture, and one of the premises for thinking of music in relation to the aural experience of speech without semantics.

In line with this hypothesis, my first chapter tackles a musical manifestation of the language question; chronologically, it focuses around the foundation, in 1955, of Italy’s first electronic music studio, the Studio di Fonologia Musicale of Milan. The studio, which as I mentioned earlier was founded by two celebrated Italian composers—Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna—and was housed in the National Broadcasting (RAI) studios in Milan. The Milanese RAI headquarters (the most powerful TV and Radio broadcasters in Italy until the mid 1960s) were, in the 1950s, negotiating the dissemination of Italian as a spoken tongue, while at the same time promoting their own prestige upon a European
scale by hosting high-modernist experimentations such as Berio’s and Maderna’s. Indeed, the Studio di Fonologia is famous nowadays for being the first electronic music studio focusing on the human voice, as well as the first in Europe to integrate exclusively electronic sounds (sinewave syntheses) with the manipulation of sampled sound. In this chapter I frame two items from the Studio’s early output—Berio and Maderna’s radio-documentary Ritratto di città (1955) and Berio’s first composition to focus entirely on the human voice, Thema: Omaggio a Joyce (1958)—as being in conversation with the language politics enforced and disseminated by RAI, as well as partaking of a broader Milanese intellectual history that links structural linguistics with phenomenology, anthropology and—thanks to the posthumously published writings of Antonio Gramsci in 1948—language history as a way of interpreting the space of the city. At stake in the early works of the studio is the potentiality for Milan to host and direct an Enlightened linguistic modernity that seemed as necessary to Italy’s new life as a Republic as it was, in its actualization, repressive and discriminatory. Thanks to the technological assets of the Studio, music itself is made into a technology that allows for official radiophonic Italian, Milanese dialect and the English language to be composed into complex aural spaces where primal scenes from the less orthodox Enlightened accounts of language—from Vico to the Verri brothers, via Rousseau—are played out.

My second chapter picks up the same set of issues, but in the aftermath of the flagging and failing of the Studio di Fonologia’s project, marked by the dwindling funding and consequent resignation of both Berio (in 1959) and Alfredo Lietti, the studio’s main engineer (in 1960). I thus shift my focus on the Studio’s other founder, Maderna, and on the 1964 premiere of his first opera, Hyperion. Hyperion is an opera
without fixed text conceived by Maderna in collaboration with Milanese stage director Virginio Puecher. It was restaged, re-scored, and adapted multiple times between 1964 and 1978. Its link to the experiments of the Studio di Fonologia is the fact that Maderna makes use of extensive tape materials from his own—highly enigmatic—experiments with voice and language at the Studio, but adapts them for the purposes of theatrical performance. But beyond that, I argue that the entire opera—even its authors’ insistence on its lack of textual fixity—is a meditation on the political relationship of orality and writing contemporaneous with, but divergent from notions of orality developed in Canada and France in those same years. The mood of the opera is deeply somber, showing a profound disillusionment with the notions of political and linguistic renovation that animate the studio’s earlier output. (After all, the opera is modeled after Friederich Hölderlin’s *Hyperion oder Der Eremit in Griechenland* (1797-1799), a grim post-Enlightenment reflection on the very idea of communication and lofty communitarianism.) This meditation still hovers, poetically speaking, about the space of Milan in the late 50s and early 60s, a time of vertiginous economic growth and expansion known in Italy as the “economic miracle.” A crucial aspect of the imagery of the Northern city’s midcentury glory is invisibility: a city impenetrable to sight. Sound—particularly sounds whose sources are hidden—plays a key role in the poetics of the city’s representations in the early 1960s, including *Hyperion*. Many of the sounds we hear in *Hyperion* (speaking and laughing voices) are “acousmatic”—that is, they come from an invisible and often untraceable sources off-stage. The untraceability of the speaking voices also depends on the fact that their speech is deliberately unintelligible: what is enigmatic about them is not just a matter of physical provenience, but of
linguistic intelligibility. Using a range of unpublished archival materials on *Hyperion*, I sketch out a network of the acousmatic sounds that delimited and animated its stage at the premiere, sounds that range from warbled speech to various complexly staged bursts of laughter. This network—I argue—points us towards an intensely Milanese hearing of voice not as the premise or excess, but as the nefarious trace of a failed linguistic communication.

With chapter three I abandon the echelons of Italian high modernism and work closely with the politics of live-recorded voices at a time—the late 1960s—of deep urban unrest, particularly in Milan. My institutional anchoring point is the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, a Gramsci-inspired, left-wing musical collective which began its activities (concerts, theater shows, a monthly magazine, and a record label) in Milan in 1962 and was intended to “lend voice,” metaphorically and literally, to various aspects of subaltern Italian culture, as well as repurposing traditional songs and work songs for the purposes of political protest. On 19 November 1969, Gianni Bosio and Silvio Ruggeri, two ethnomusicologists from the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano, armed themselves with portable recorders and wandered amongst a crowd of demonstrators near Milan’s Duomo. The resulting LP, entitled *I fatti di Milano* (the events of Milan) sounds, on first listening, like a younger sibling to the lo-fi recordings of urban sound that had been part of recording technology’s market as early as the 1910s. And yet *I fatti* is also a mangled hybrid of artistic and political intentions: it was released by a label that had by and large concerned itself with Italian rural folk songs and workers’ songs, and never with the sounds of the contemporary Italian city. Even more puzzling are the instructions that accompany the LP: as the sleeve note explains, the demonstration degenerated into a riot and resulted in the
violent—and to this day legally unresolved—death of Antonio Annarumma, a police officer. Bosio and Ruggeri presented the recording as evidence of the day’s events, hoping to help the case of the demonstrators accused of murdering the policeman. The record thus constitutes not only a sudden swerve from music to “sound” in the collective’s output, but a move from aesthetic artifact to sound document, indeed, to outright forensic evidence. And yet—just as with Antonioni’s incriminating photograph in *Blow Up* (1966)—the evidence grows inexorably murkier with every listening. The chapter hones in on the contradiction between *I fatti di Milano*’s declared purpose, and the sound recording it mobilizes towards that purpose. I begin with the hypothesis that this contradiction, rather than signaling a failure or lack of understanding on behalf of the record’s creators, might be a deliberately staged rupture, a way to produce a listening experience in which the distinction between politics and aesthetics is radically suspended; in order to trace the origins of this rather unusual staging of street noises and voices, I delve deep into the chasms that formed between the N.C.I.’s directors in the mid 1960s, chasms that involved Roberto Leydi, the foremost ethnomusicologist in Milan and actor and playwright Dario Fo. I trace these chasms to matters of linguistic representation, showing how the disquiet around the production and recording of dialectal voices tipped into the collective’s anxious turning of their ear towards the city that hosted them.

Drawing on both sound studies and Italian political philosophy, I will argue that the record embodies an idiosyncratic—but for us, highly recognizable—relationship between music and soundscape, between sound event and its technological reproduction, and ultimately between political event and the act of writing history.
Two of the most obvious ideological blind spots of the N.C.I. were, interestingly, the implicit upholding of dichotomies of country and city, and the sharp contempt for popular music, particularly Anglophone popular and rock music, which of course held sway in Milan at the time; it is with a mind to show the reappearance of a similar politics of language in areas of musical production that would otherwise be mutually exclusive that I turn to Adriano Celentano in my final chapter. Celentano folded into his person the very blindspots of an institution like the N.C.I.: son of an Apulian family who’d moved to Milan shortly before his birth in 1938, he would become hugely successful as an importer of American rock n’ roll twenty years later, and grew into one of the key cultural icons of Milan. I catch up with Celentano in 1972, the year in which he released, as a single, Prisencolinensinainciusol, a nonsense rock n roll song whose spoken-sung, rap-like lyrics amount to an imitation—or as I will term it, a sung mishearing—of American English. Although the song would become a major hit in 1974, it fell flat among audiences upon its initial release; the chapter unfurls the multiple ways in which Celentano reinscribed the song both by recording it again as part of an album, and by performing it on TV twice. I will argue that Celentano’s lampoon of American English is a gateway to thinking of how music can work language into a carrier for geopolitical relationships (in this case, for instance, the impact of the Marshall Plan on Milanese cultural production and policies). Most importantly, I show that beyond the reference to English, there are multiple, non-verbal meanings worked over time into the song’s language that refer to southerness, dialect, and the racial profile of southern Italians in Milan. Going against the grain of previous scholarship on Celentano, I argue that the use of music and language in Prisencolinensinainciusol can be heard as an immunitary defense against a complex
notion of blackness whose signifiers festered, unnamed, upon Celentano’s performing body in the 1970s.
Chapter 1

Milan’s Studio di Fonologia:
Voice Politics in the City, 1955-58

1.1. Milan, at the Threshold

On 21 February 1957, the young German music critic Fred Prieberg set off to Milan to visit Italy’s first electronic music studio, the Studio di Fonologia, nested within the RAI headquarters on Corso Sempione. The resulting essay, entitled “Electronic Music in Milan” (1958), was to be one of the earliest accounts of the Studio to be written by an outsider.¹ In it, Prieberg describes the output of the Studio’s two founders, Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna, from the year of its foundation, 1955, until 1958.

From the point of view of the Studio’s nominal focus on phonology—and thus on aspects of the human voice—this is an obscure period. Hardly any extensive work on the human voice had been carried out there by the time Prieberg visited. Berio’s *Thema* (1958), the first major composition from the Studio to use a sampled human voice, was then just being sketched (Prieberg mentions it in the end of his essay). Prieberg therefore interprets the word “fonologia” in the studio’s title as signaling not a concentration on voice but a string of early sound experiments unconnected with musical purposes.² Two

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² Prieberg strikingly translates the Studio’s name in German as something completely unrelated to phonology—namely as “Studio für musikalische Schallkunde,” which translates to “Studio for the musical science of sounds.” See Prieberg, “Elektronische Musik in Mailand,” 138: “In the beginning the Studio was certainly not used to make
years later, the Studio’s composers would produce the extended experiments with the recorded voice (more precisely, Cathy Berberian’s ‘voice) that ushered the institution’s name into Anglophone musicology: among them the most famous is surely Berio’s Visage (1961).

Yet Prieberg’s account is striking in that it gives careful thought to another issue that is rarely considered in recent musicological accounts of the studio: the nature of its belonging to Milan. Prieberg begins the essay by recalling at length his train journey towards the city:

I sat on the fast train to Milan, the flatlands behind Como flying past me. Gradually, the white chain of the Alps, which had emerged North-West like a giant set of white teeth—disappeared in the fog. Suburbs, slums, industrial areas. The metropolis took in the train with open arms. Milan. The masses thronged in the small streets and large boulevards. Cars honked incessantly and proceeded in flocks, riding at breakneck speed between buses and trams, restrained and frightened by the traffic lights; men and more men, all in hurry, all going somewhere. One might have doubted whether Milan was really in Italy, when out of a street corner—as if awakened by a romantic legend—a tanned man in peasant clothing emerged from the crowd. He was blowing into an ancient shawm and was carrying a white bird in a small wooden cage.

Such descriptive detours are highly unusual for Prieberg. Indeed, this account of the urban landscape is a strange moment in Prieberg’s rich output of essays on electronic music so much as electroacoustic experiments of a general nature, hence the name ‘Studio for the musical science of sounds.’” See Prieberg, “Elektronische Musik in Mailand,” 138.


4 Prieberg, “Elektronische Musik in Mailand,” 137.
“Electronic Music in Milan” forms part of a collection on electronic experiments in cities as disparate as Tokyo, New York, Warsaw, and Paris; none of the essays—apart from the one on Milan—is introduced with a description. Prieberg’s evocation of the city, then, is hardly a rhetorical flourish, but rather something of an allegory, a means towards a political commentary that rises closer to the surface as the description develops. Is Milan—Prieberg wonders—really part of Italy? Is it not rather a freak occurrence on the plains beneath the Alps?

Prieberg’s wry geopolitics of Milan was hardly a new idea in 1957. His conception of Italy as a rural idyll might have been, in part, an inherited German Romantic outlook towards Goethe’s “das Land wo die Zitronen blühn.” Even within national boundaries the northern city’s Austrian past and unparalleled industrial growth in the second half of the nineteenth century had done much to foster a rhetoric of non-belonging. And yet Prieberg’s rendition of this age-old doubt regarding Milan’s belonging to the nation is striking in that, in his story, the city produces a response to the writer’s skepticism: an out-of-place peasant, complete with ancient shawm and caged bird. The figure is overladen with sonic signifiers—notably, the first ones we encounter in what is, after all, an essay on a musical institution. The signifiers of sound are both related to voice: the bird, most obviously, but also the shawm, which Prieberg describes in terms of the peasant’s exhalations.⁵ Curiously, Prieberg refrains from describing any sound outright; it is almost as if the medium of the written letter had discreetly stopped

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⁵ I am referencing the idea of wind instruments as a way of disabling—or alternatively channeling—the physical capacity for voice by engaging the player’s breath. See Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 79: “flute and pipes, played with the mouth, entail an absolute suppression of the voice. They are wind instruments that substitute for singing, with melody but no words.”
short of approaching its limit—voice beyond semantics. We, the readers, are provided neither with birdsong nor with a mention of the shawm’s reedy snarl, but are rather left suspended between the anticipated sonority of the apparition and its literary rendition. It is now that the Studio finally makes an appearance. Prieberg continues:

The giant headquarters of the Italian Radio is an off-white building block, far taller than the surrounding houses, but itself only a toy building block at the feet of the steel radio tower, crowned with glass and antennae. One had the feeling of entering an ostentatious factory building. Nowhere more than in Milan does one have so clearly before one’s eyes the rationalization of predominantly intellectual labor.6

Offered up as a cinematic jump-cut from the peasant musician, the image of the studio shares some essential cues with that of the apparition we just left: white, evoked in relation to the peasant’s bird, coats the building’s outer walls. The juxtaposition of the peasant with the immaculate songbird he carries resonates with the juxtaposition of the houses on Corso Sempione with the white headquarters’ of the RAI building; there is even a symmetry between the mesh of the bird cage and the steely web of the radio tower.

What are we to make of the odd simile between the Radio headquarters—a rarefied modernity planted in an inhospitable terrain—and the lost peasant tumbling out of the frenzied city crowd, and why is this peasant—and his ambiguous relationship to breath and voice—evoked in relation to the early days of the Italian electronic avant-garde? In other words, what kind of relationship between voice and city is being sketched out in Prieberg’s journey towards the Studio?

6 Prieberg, “Elektronische Musik in Mailand,” 137.
My chapter delves into the historical connections between city, voice, and the Studio di Fonologia’s early years, providing an intellectual and political foundation to the more famous, abstract work on the recorded voice of the early 1960s. I argue that the peculiarity of the Italian electronic avant-garde in the 1950s resided not only—as has famously been argued—in its combination of electronic and sampled sound materials, or even in its attention to the voice, but in the way the focus on voice reflected concrete anxieties and hopes with regard to the political uses of language in Milan’s changing cityscape, intellectual history, and media presence. In order to do this, I will center my argument in the two compositions that—perhaps not coincidentally—frame the output covered in Prieberg’s essay. Although vastly different from one another, these two compositions use speech and voice to portray urban public spaces. The first one is Berio and Maderna’s “radio-portrait” of the city of Milan, entitled Ritratto di città; the second one—a more abstracted take on the sonority of urban spaces—is Berio’s Thema, a composition based on James Joyce’s famous literary rendition of the busy Ormond Pub in early twentieth-century Dublin in Ulysses.

Prieberg’s long-winded introduction is replete with images that belonged to a thick symbolic network in midcentury Milan. The reason for the RAI Headquarters’ odd physiognomy against the surrounding cityscape is that it was built at the point in which, along the boulevard-like Corso Sempione and past the ancient walls, the city would have slowly begun to taper towards its northwestern edge. One has to wonder whether Prieberg could have known that Corso Sempione—and its continuation, Viale Certosa—was an urban artery with near-mythic associations in the mind of twentieth-century Milanese. After the opening of the new city cemetery (the Cimitero Maggiore) in 1895, along the
city’s northwestern periphery, Corso Sempione had become a crucial part of the route
that most poignantly joins the city to its outside—the journey of the dead. By 1906, this
route had been inscribed into the urban transport system; the city authorities created a
tram route that crossed the city diagonally from the southeastern city gate (Porta
Romana) to the Cimitero Maggiore in order to transport coffins from crowded minor
local cemeteries to the new cemetery; locals had nicknamed the tram “La gioconda” [the
joyous one]. He was more likely to know that it was in the north-western periphery of
Milan—the districts of Bovisa and Quarto Oggiaro, a stone’s throw from cemetery and
charterhouse—that the early flows of migration from the southern rural provinces were
accommodated in what became the city’s first industrial slums. The hurried construction
of barracks and mass housing estates for workers in Quarto Oggiaro began in 1954,
yielding by the early 60s the towering housing estates that would become both
emblematic of the city’s industrial power and of the ghostly existence of its burgeoning

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7 The most famous literary rendition of the journey between the Cemetary and the city
center is the long poem “Caporetto 1917,” penned by Milanese dialectal poet Delio Tessa
in 1922. In the poem, Tessa portrayed the talk and shifting mood of a tram full of people
returning to the city after visiting their dead at the Cimitero Maggiore on All Souls’ Day
in 1917, while the battle of Caporetto is being fought in the north-east of the peninsula by
Italians against German and Austro-Hungarian troops. The poem was published in the
8 On “La gioconda,” see Francesco Ogliari, *Milano in tram: storia del trasporto pubblico
milanese* (Milan: Hoepli, 2006). It is also worth noting that the history of the cemetery’s
location in relation to city boundaries (particularly the shift from inner city local
cemeteries to external large cemeteries) is noted in Michel Foucault’s famous
unpublished essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopia and Heterotopia,” trans. Jay Miscowiec,
Foucault postulates that the modern city contains spaces that present alternative versions
of the city itself. To him, the cemetery—particularly in its out-of-city-bounds, nineteenth-
century incarnation—is one such space.
and impoverished labor force, huddled around—in grim irony—the gathering place of the city’s dead.⁹

In Prieberg’s enigmatic description, the flash-like appearances of both the peasant and the radio headquarters seem to mark the Studio di Fonologia’s emergence at something of a geopolitical “threshold,” a state of belonging and non-belonging. This threshold is the uneasy place of Milan’s aggressive urban modernity within the Italian state, manifested at street level as the city’s shifting relationship to its outside, its disappearing rural periphery, the seismic change in its demographic make-up as throngs of men and women (often peasants) crowded its periphery. Within this network, Prieberg’s evocation of voice—the breath, the shawm, the caged bird—takes on political significance as the aural marker of the city’s edge: it is neither unrestrained voice nor intelligible speech, neither *phoné* nor *logos*. Forty years later, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben would theorize the formation of sovereign power in the state as a moment of threshold where the boundary between animal life and human life, inchoate voice and rational language, is suspended.¹⁰ Less than a decade into the establishment of Italy as a democratic state in 1948, we find something of this concern with the threshold—and with the things it does to voice—in Prieberg’s wry gaze over Milan. The peasant’s ghost carries the voice that is simultaneously evoked and disavowed both by Prieberg’s literary

⁹ John Foot notes how “Milan had, historically, ‘expelled’ its workers en masse to its endless urban fringe.” See *Milan Since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2001), 53. In the same passage, Foot also remarks that Bovisa was already populated by the local working class; while Bovisa was not reshaped by mass public housing (instead, the rising immigrant population crowded in existing housing), Quarto Oggiaro’s physiognomy was radically altered by new, towering housing estates.

description, and by the “rationalized intellectual labor” that characterizes Milan’s newfangled, showy but unsteady modernity. Dismiss as he might the studio’s reference to phonology—the science of joining phoné to logos—Prieberg’s description raises a fundamental unanswered question. In midcentury Italy, what has phonology to do with Milan’s modeling of urban modernity, and why—in the political economy of this particular city—does it join together avant-garde music and state-owned radio?

1.2. The Milanese voice in *Ritratto di Città*

In order to shed light on the significance of voice in the project of the Studio di Fonologia, we can now address the first of our case studies, *Ritratto di Città*, a radio-documentary created in 1954 by Berio and Maderna, one year prior to the official opening of the studio, and thus long before phonology was announced as a titular research area.¹¹ *Ritratto* is the first piece discussed by Prieberg in his survey of the studio’s output, and was in all likelihood also the first piece he was shown by Berio at the studio. It consists of a narrative text written by Roberto Leydi—later one of the country’s leading ethnomusicologists—and musical commentary composed by Berio and Maderna. Leydi’s text describes contemporary Milan over the course of an entire day. Berio and Maderna provide a musical commentary of synthetic sounds, pre-recorded street noise

¹¹ Indeed, *Ritratto* was created soon after Berio had submitted a first proposal for an electronic music studio to the general director of RAI, Filiberto Guala. The proposed name for the studio at the time was “Centro sperimentale di ricerche radiofoniche” [Center for Experimental Radiophonic Research], a name that sounds close to the “Groupe de Recherches de Musique Concrète.” This chronology of the first proposal in relation to *Ritratto* is pointed out by Angela Ida De Benedictis in her “Opera prima: *Ritratto di Città* e gli esordi della musica elettroacustica in Italia,” in Veniero Rizzardi, Angela Ida De Benedictis, eds., *Nuova Musica alla Radio: Esperienze allo Studio di Fonologia della Rai di Milano, 1954-1959* (Rome: CIDIM & RAI editions, 2000), 27-56.
(mainly of trams and bells), and collages of speech fragments. Indeed, the documentary has a key place in the history of the Studio, included as it was in Berio and Maderna’s pitch [to RAI executives] for an electronic music studio. Despite the obvious care that went into its craft, then, Ritratto had no claim to the supposed self-sufficiency of high art, but instead embodied the overlap of the emerging project of the Studio di Fonologia with the aesthetic and linguistic concerns of State-owned radio in Milan. This relationship to place is apparent in the very title and subject matter of the piece. Ritratto was both the first and the last piece either composer would dedicate to the city that hosted their electronic experiments.

One of the immediately striking aspects of Ritratto’s representation of Milan is the extent to which—despite its utilitarian raison d’être as part of a sales pitch—it rejects the trope of the electrified modern metropolis. Rather than exalt the city’s bustle, the text of Ritratto lingers at the city’s temporal and spatial thresholds: the hush that descends at the turning point of night and dawn; the evanescent ceiling cast by fog; the potato fields that lie beyond the city’s edge. Rather than mark its urban traits, the author and the composers bring the city into sight and hearing through the phenomena that render it blurry and indistinct. In this respect, Ritratto departs from celebrations of the synergy between technological advance, urbanization, and music that had had such a rich history in Milan since at least the late nineteenth century.12 The most famous incarnation of such celebratory modernity was of course Milanese futurism. Luigi Russolo, author of the

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most famous futurist manifesto for music, “The Art of Noises,” had in fact composed his own _Risveglio di Città_ (1913), a piece whose only remaining written trace consists of its first page: a set of staggered entries for orchestra and intonarumori. Indeed the title of _Ritratto di Città_ is probably a variation on this precedent, one that, significantly, replaces the word “risveglio” (awakening) with the seemingly more static and reflexive “ritratto” (portrait, representation).13

Ritratto is 29’ 33” long, and consists of a male narrating voice (taken by two alternating speakers, Nando Gazzolo and Ottavio Fanfani) interpolated with—and very rarely underscored by—musical inserts ranging in duration from just a few seconds to nearly three minutes. The sound materials that make up _Ritratto_ are raw, often coarsely thrown together via the very basic apparatus available to the composers at the time. It

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13 Much could be said about the relation between “risveglio” and “ritratto” as historical modes of thinking about Milan, modes that are less than a half century apart. For one, the awakening of the city evoked by Russolo implies a certain organic cohesiveness to the city, the movements of a body politic whose noises implied an aggressive modernity, and an aesthetization of burgeoning industry as a tool for war. This beautification of war as the apotheosis of the body politic was long ago diagnosed as an element of fascism by Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility” (1936). More specifically, Susan Buck-Morss notes that the structure of spectacle in fascism is a tripartite one—matter (hyle), agent, observer—in which the masses of spectators are both the matter acted upon and detached observers, a dual role that obscures the fact that they have no agency with a kind of aesthetic pleasure. I can imagine Risveglio’s intonarumori within this structure, in which the listener is both the sonic matter worked into action and the observer of the rising of the city, but not its prime mover. See Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” October, Vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 3-41, esp. 30-33. _Ritratto_, with its insistence on the wedging of representation between the subject and object of observation, and its constant emphasis of the mediating role of the senses, has a knowing, almost ironic relationship to futurist spectacle; because of its refusal to superimpose any kind of developmental narrative onto its material (there’s no arch to the narration, and the chronological span of day-to-night seems a purely formal expedient), it returns, in a way, a perceptual agency onto its listener, in that the aural landscape it presents is so obscure and enigmatic that the listener is invited to participate in the narrator’s quest for often absent or irretrievable aural realities.
consists—aside from the narrating voices—of three brief collages of recorded speech (attributed to Berio), some lengthier interludes using only synthesized sound (the materials for which were loaned to Bruno Maderna by the Phonetics Institute in Bonn), and simple manipulations (mostly sped-up playback) of a prepared piano. The arch of the documentary is gentle—it follows the unfolding of the day and night without ever reaching an apex. An opening section (duration: 4’ 30’’) on nighttime and silence is followed by an evocation of the start of the working day and the cold fog typical of Milan (duration: 6’ 08’’). The documentary then skips ahead to the somber end of the working day, tapers off into an early evening visit to a ghostly housing estate, and then to Milan’s Duomo, its organs and worshippers (duration: 8’ 40’’). The subsequent section—devoted to nightlife—is significantly shorter (duration: 2’ 27’’) and followed by a lengthy section on the ghosts that haunt the city’s central station and its canals (duration: 6’ 20’’), which closes by re-evoking the advent of silence at the turning point of night and day.

The opening of Ritratto—and indeed the narrative arch of the whole documentary—could be seen as the inversion of Risveglio’s opening. Whereas in Risveglio the initial silence is but the ground upon which staggered entries of intonarumori and orchestral instruments crowd quickly (a performance of the bustle of the awakening city-scape), in Ritratto silence is not simply ground but a key poetic figure. The first moments of Ritratto thus consist of a narrator reciting,

È molto difficile spiegare come succeda e perché succeda, è anche difficile sorrenderlo, scoprirlo. Parlo naturalmente di quel minuto, o di quell’ora, o di quel secondo, non importa, in cui ad ogni nuovo risveglio di mattino, la città si ritrova tutta, improvvisamente e con sorpresa, coperta di silenzio.
It is very difficult to explain how it happens and why it happens, it is also difficult to catch it by surprise, to discover it. I am talking [of course] about that moment, or that hour, or that second—it doesn’t matter which—when, at every new morning awakening, the whole city finds itself—unexpectedly and unbelievably—enfolded by silence.]\(^{14}\)

Leydi’s text drew specifically on authors such as Alfonso Gatto and Delio Tessa who, in the 1930s, wrote about Milan as a ghostly, sensorially elusive place.\(^{15}\) Gatto and Tessa, two writers of strong anti-Fascist leanings, were writing in an anti-positivistic vein precisely as a response to contemporary noisy celebrations of urban progress. *Ritratto* is intriguing because it brings this literary tradition—via musical commentary and narrators—into both the aural and oral realm. The subject of an extended opening meditation, silence is here defined as an atmosphere of tense expectation that pervades the city at the turning point from night to day: an atmosphere that is thick, almost tactile, and also sonorous. As the narrator speaks of the imminence of silence, bells appear on the soundtrack, and the final word of the opening paragraph—“silence”—is followed by a short electronic interlude. Silence is not as an acoustic reality determined by the lack of sound, but a mode of perception: an act of harkening.

The association of the idea of silence with listening was very much a landmark of avant-garde musical thinking in the mid-fifties. Six years prior to *Ritratto*, Pierre Schaeffer had worked out a new aesthetic program for electronic music—the famous *musique concrète*, constituted by edited sequences of sampled sounds heard away from

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their context and source. Recording technology—the sampling of sounds divorced from their origins—was understood by Schaeffer to encourage a listening for intrinsic sonic properties. By 1966 he would famously theorize this mode through phenomenological terminology. Following Husserl, he coined the term “reduced listening,” a mode in which visual and aural context are bracketed away (as with the Husserlian *epoché*). In aural terms, the *epoché* was obtained by the composer actively silencing—via editing—any trace of the location and context of the sample. Silence was also crucial—albeit in a radically opposite fashion—to John Cage, who maintained that silence was not an absence of sonic stimuli but a renewed attention to the inescapable sonority of one’s surroundings. Both Schaeffer and Cage—including the latter’s 4’ 33’’ (1952)—would have been familiar figures in the Darmstadt avant-garde that Berio and Maderna frequented in the early 1950s.

It is in relation to these emerging modalities of listening—to which we will return in the next section—that *Ritratto* most prominently displays its relation to the modernism of its day. And yet the silence mentioned in *Ritratto* does not quite perform either of these modalities of listening. Silence in the documentary involves neither abstracted sonorous objects nor rediscovered sonorous surroundings. The format of the radio-documentary allows the focus to remain firmly on the voice of the narrator, who, by reciting Leydi’s text, performs something of a naming ritual, defining and explaining the meaning of Milan’s “silence” over the course of several minutes. The incantatory role of

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16 The text in which Schaeffer begins to write in overtly phenomenological terms is the *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1966).
17 It is significant that Cage’s “Lecture on Silence” would be translated in *Incontri musicali*, the academic journal of the Studio di Fonologia; see John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” *Incontri musicali*, No. 3 (August 1959), 128-149.
the speaking voice becomes especially apparent at the climax (and conclusion) of the opening section:

Il silenzio si impadronisce senza violenza della città inconsapevole. Spegne con un soffio gelato le ultime voci, ormai pallide e opache: il grido della civetta sul tetto antico di San Simpliciano, il fischio remoto di un treno sperduto in uno scalo alle soglie della città, i sogni agitati di sospiri degli adolescenti, le parole difficili e dure di un tardivo mercato d’amore, gli alterchi degli ubriachi, il pianto angoscioso dei lattanti negletti, l’estremo saluto degli amanti. Per un minuto, un’ora o un secondo, non importa, la città smarrisce, nel tacere inspiegabile d’ogni voce, anche il senso e il peso e la dimensione della sua terribile esistenza sonora. Sul pulsare segreto e interiore del suo ritmo biologico, inarcata e tesa fin quasi a spezzarsi in ogni minima particella dell’aria, la città aspetta…

[Silence gently overpowers the unknowing city. It extinguishes with icy breath the last voices, now pale and opaque: the screech of the owl on the ancient roof of San Simpliciano, the distant whistle of a train lost in a station at the threshold of the city, the sighs of dreaming adolescents, the difficult, harsh words of late-night sex market, brawls of drunkards, the anguished cries of neglected infants and the final goodbyes of lovers. For a minute, an hour, or a second—it doesn’t matter which—the city loses, in the inexplicable hushing of all voices, the sense and weight of its terrible sonic existence. Pulsating with its own secret biological rhythm, arched and tense to breaking point in every particle of air, the city waits…]18

Leydi’s text describes silence not as the dwindling of noises commonly associated with the city—the buses, trams, and cars of Prieberg’s description—but as tied to the absence of the human voice. And yet as the focus narrows down to voice and its absence, the narrator’s low, forlorn speech is set into high relief by an electronic drone; the narrator’s utterances grow more prominent, more emphatic, as he lingers on the description of the last traces of human speech. The linguistic ritual surrounding the word silence—its repeated naming—ends with a peculiar twist: a voice growing more prominent as it declares the extinction of all human utterances.

18 Leydi, “Ritratto di Città”: 329.
The end of the section on silence—five minutes, a quarter of the way into the documentary—introduces a key aspect of the poetics of *Ritratto*: the foregrounding not just of the narrator’s voice, but of the way this interacts with the frequent descriptions of the human voice within the recited text. As mentioned previously, *Ritratto*’s text is—rather unusually—spoken by two alternating narrators. Their timbre and delivery are audibly different: Gazzolo’s voice is a resonant baritone, his prose carefully paced, slightly breathy, his tone almost plaintive; Fanfani has a faster pace, matched by clipped delivery and a nasal timbre. Gazzolo recites most of the text (including the opening section on silence); Fanfani appears only twice, for the rare segments that describe the city’s activities. The division of speaking labor has the unusual effect of turning the speaker’s voice—typically a diaphanous carrier of narration—into a more noticeable material entity.¹⁹

Fanfani’s first segment seals the end of the section on silence, which ends with an insert of tram and percussion sounds interpolated with a vocal collage of “commuters,” a mixed-gender group somnolently uttering the phrase “un’altra giornata” (another day) in a slow, fugal *stretto*. The collage, announcing the start of the city’s daily activities, presents us with voices whose dull delivery clashes with the nighttime wails whose hushing the narrator has just described. The opening of Fanfani’s ensuing segment

¹⁹ The two voices are not only audibly different but carry different sets of associations. Gazzolo was fifteen years younger than Fanfani, and had inherited the profession from his parents (his father was a famous actor and voice-over specialist, his mother a radio presenter). His low, folorn, precisely-enunciated voice, molded by a slight pleading intonation, responded closely to the affect required of the new radiophonic voices: Gazzolo subsequently had an extremely successful career as an actor who moved between theater, cinema, radio and TV. Fanfani on the other hand—and despite a few important appearances on the broadcast media—had his most successful years as a theater actor and leading diction coach for Milan’s Piccolo Teatro in the 1950s and 60s. His nasal, clipped delivery betrays a vocal training emerging from wartime Italian radio.
(“secretly awaited noise, deep animal breath […] empty ambition prepares […] the feverish clamor of the new day”\textsuperscript{20}) and his near-martial efficiency in delivering the text, mark the end of threshold state of night, silence, and mysterious voices: we, the listeners, are led back into the daytime.

Yet Fanfani’s segment turns quickly back onto matters of the human voice. Indeed it offers the listener the prospect of a turning point, the ultimate discovery of the Milanese voice:

Ma al primo rompere del sole attraverso lo sbieco delle strade, al primo dissolversi impaurito della nebbia, sulle grida dei cani e sui gemiti dei gatti riemerge la voce dell’uomo.

[But as the first rays of sun fall askew on the streets, as the fog begins fearfully to melt away, the voice of man rises again above the howling of dogs and the moaning of cats.]\textsuperscript{21}

The “voice of man” possesses a power to break silence—one piercing the screen of fog and darkness that veils the city. However, the provenience of this reassuring, indigenous-urban voice is temporarily withheld from the listener. All we know is that this voice must be different from those we have heard thus far—the two narrators and the chorus of commuters. Indeed whereas all previous vocal utterances are obviously scripted, a triumph of good enunciation, the Milanese “voice of man” in Ritratto might be unscripted, resonant and attached to locale—inflected with Milanese dialect; perhaps even a singing voice.

\textsuperscript{20}“Fragore segretamente atteso, profondo respiro animale […] vuote ambizioni preparano nel cuore dell’ingranaggio l’esaltato clamore della nuova giornata.” Leydi, “Ritratto di Città,” 330.
\textsuperscript{21}Leydi, “Ritratto di Città,” 330.
However, what follows the anticipation of the rise of the “voice of man” is instead an insert, a collage of fragments in Italian bureaucratic jargon:

“Well gentile riscontro…” “Il ragionier Rossi…” “Estratto conto, quietanza…” “47.5255,” “Entrate” “Libretto” “Riferendoci alla vostra del…”

[“Your courteous reply…” “accountant Rossi” “Bank statement, receipt” “47.5255” “Entries” “Checkbook” “With reference to yours from …” ]

The mythical voice of man turns out to be nothing more than fragments of accountants’ and bank clerks’ voices. Reported writing, not speech, produces our much-anticipated human utterance. The extent to which this is a trumping of the expectations raised by the narrator lies in a combination of factors. Not only is this the voice of someone reading out loud, rather than speaking, but the text being read is hardly in a traditionally expressive lexicon. The voices of the accountants are also not sampled from city streets, or even from an office. Instead, the sharpness of the recording and pronunciation suggests a studio recording. Lastly, although the speech of these characters does not betray the diction of a trained actor, it is unrealistically accent-free and devoid of intonation. It is as if the speech had been processed so as to shed any phonological link to the material context of its utterance.

This refusal to attach voice to place produces a ghostly human presence, and yet the commentary—now back to Gazzolo’s resonant baritone—insists in presenting this insert as a true incarnation of the city. “In [the accountant’s] dull eyes” we are informed,

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22 Leydi, “Ritratto di Città,” 330. The words in this quotation are not part of Leydi’s text, but are the transcribed text from Berio and Maderna’s vocal inserts, which is here included as part of the documentary text.
“one can then read with surprise the true story of the people of Milan.” We are thus confronted with a peculiar paradox regarding Milanese voices: the renunciation of orality and inflection is not—as Enlightenment theories of the origin of language famously maintained—the result of the impact of modernization on an original mother tongue. Voice doesn’t lose its resonance because of lost ties to the site of its origin; on the contrary, a speaking voice’s ruptured appearance—its dullness, lack of resonance, inflection, and obvious literary tarnish—inescapably tie it to its place of origin, an origin that consists of rupture. It is the seemingly disembodied nature of the bank clerk’s voice that concretely anchors it in Milanese ground.

In 1967, Jacques Derrida would advance a similar argument against the understanding of writing—and of the articulation of voice into speech—as a rupturing of an original “voice.” Yet, some thirteen years earlier, the same folding of writing, orality, presence, and absence was being worked out on the far less elevated intellectual ground of a RAI sales pitch. It is not, of course, that Ritratto’s authors were actively rehearsing a philosophy of voice. However, the elements for the collapse of the binaries that Derrida would later rehearse were already apparent in the way that Ritratto incarnated linguistic anxieties that belonged to the emerging set of aesthetic and linguistic parameters of the early day of Italian State radio.


24 This was the famous tryptich consisting of De la grammatologie (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), L’écriture et la différence (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967) and La voix et le phénomène (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967). Of Grammatology takes to task Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theory of the origin of language, in which the linguistic sign causes the splitting of an originally united sign and signifier, and the subservience of voice to logos; Speech and Phenomena also deconstructs the relationship of voice to ideologies of embodiment and presence, albeit from the vantage point of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology of language in the Logical Investigations.
More than Rome, Milan at midcentury was the fulcrum of the Italian media, and particularly of radio. Part of the political project of the new State radio was to fashion a language for broadcasting that was both cleansed of associations with the Fascist regime and intelligible to as wide a sector of the national population as possible. This project was, in the case of Italy, hampered by extreme linguistic fragmentation: local dialect, rather than the Italian language, was often prevalent among inhabitants of the peninsula in the early 1950s.25 This factor, combined with widespread illiteracy, made it impossible for Italy to partake of what Walter J. Ong termed “second orality” (the renewed harkening to speech in the era of electrified media): even by the 1950s the Italian language was, to a large extent, an idiom spoken by the urban middle classes.26 The radio speech inherited from the Fascist regime was pompous and overwrought, a tongue that sounded irreducibly foreign to the majority of its listeners. Yet local dialect (common in regional radio stations) was banned from state radio not only because of intelligibility, but because, as Tullio de Mauro noted in 1962, dialects had political connotations: they signaled an impoverished rurality that the urbanized State-owned radio

25 In his seminal study, *Storia linguistica dell’Italia unita* (Bari: Laterza, 1962), Tullio De Mauro gathered the following statistics regarding literacy rates in 1951: 14% of the population was illiterate, with northern regions boasting rates as low as 3%, and southern regions (Sicilia, Puglia, Basilicata and Calabria) going as high as 32%. Yet De Mauro also dwells on the fact that an ability to read and write often did not translate into spoken practice, thus establishing an area of “potentiality” for spoken Italian that remained unfulfilled into the 1950s. De Mauro eventually concludes that in 1951 “more than four fifths of the population habitually used dialect, and nearly two-thirds used dialect as the idiom for speaking in all occasions of social life.” De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell’Italia unita*, 131. The data on literacy rates are on pp. 90-99.

26 The concept of “second orality” is most famously developed in Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982).
did not wish to represent. By the mid 1950s, Milan’s multiplying factories attracted mass immigration, leading to the shaping of the city’s periphery that Prieberg observed on his train journey. Remnants of dialect, the signs of rural poverty scattered around the peninsula, were folded into the rising northern metropolis in the form of the cheap labor necessary for its expansion. It is within this context that Milan now found itself at the center of a political project of the highest order: the city was to be the urban and mediatic crucible for the creation of an oral tradition for the national language.

Sets of rules for the composition of radiophonic texts were written by radio-journalists and famous writers alike: Carlo Emilio Gadda would publish an instruction manual (Norme per la redazione di un testo radiofonico) one year prior to Ritratto, in 1953, encouraging simple syntax and the avoidance of colloquialisms; journalist Riccardo Bacchelli published a similar set of rules, Oratoria della radio, in 1952. Of course, the adaptation of the Italian language to the radio had begun some thirty years prior at the EIAR, the Fascist regime’s radio station that was finally dismantled in 1946.

Under scrutiny in the new State radio was not only grammar, but also timbre and

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27 De Mauro expands on the unwitting role of neorealist cinema in framing dialects as idioms related to misery, provinciality and backwardness; See De Mauro, Storia linguistica dell’Italia unita, 124.

28 The period of Milan’s role as the fulcrum of state-owned media coincided roughly with the fifteen years of radiophony that preceded the advent of television in 1954; by the mid-fifties, Milan would give way to Rome. The brief period of Milan’s mediatic primacy is documented in Ada Ferrari’s Milano e la RAI: un incontro mancato? Luci ed ombre di una capitale in transizione (1945-1977) (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2002).

29 Both Gadda and Bacchelli are mentioned in Ada Ferrari, Milano e la RAI, 89. Original references are as follows: Carlo Emilio Gadda, Norme per la redazione di un testo radiofonico, first published anonymously as a pamphlet for internal circulation at the RAI (Turin, Edizione Radio Italiana, 1953), 1-18; Riccardo Bacchelli, “L’oratoria alla Radio,” in L’approdo letterario, No.1 (January-March 1952), 50-51.

30 On this point see Gianni Isola, L’ha scritto la radio: storia e testi della radio durante il fascismo, 1924-1944 (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), 45.
delivery. Historian Ada Ferrari writes of radio-journalists being subjected to “draconian rules: a rigid protocol imposed a radiophonic diction halfway between perfect pronunciation and common speech.” The injunction seems far too vague (where, exactly, was the mid-point between colloquial speech and pristine diction?) to be the subject of a rigorous rule. Behind it lies the search for something Roland Barthes would describe as “the grain of the voice”: the audible trace of the fleshly organs that Barthes found exclusively in bodies “speaking [their] mother tongue.” Yet we find here an ante-litteram inversion of Barthes’ linguistic credo—an affect to be grafted onto a language proposed, rather than acquired, as a nation-wide practice. At stake was nothing less than the projection of the flesh of a speaking body that would represent, and eventually speak to, the ideal citizen of Italy’s first republic.

It is within this political domain that Ritratto’s odd staging of the voice—the narrators’ voices, the definition of silence, the elusive and ultimately disappointing “voice of mankind,” makes richest sense. Italy would—of course—reach a more homogenous linguistic identity (thanks to the diffusion of radio and especially television) as early as a decade after Ritratto. Yet this work marks the emergence of the ideology of a common tongue, the unique way in which the enactment of what was—then—a linguistic abstraction becomes nothing less than a landmark of Milan, a voice deeply

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31 Ada Ferrari, *Milano e la RAI*, 89-93.
33 Curiously, although the question of the mother tongue is crucial to the production of “grain,” hearing “grain” does not does not have similar stipulations. Barthes’ opening example of a “grainy” voice is a Russian church bass, and Barthes did not speak Russian. The affect of the materiality of the mother tongue can, he seems to assume, be picked up even when we are linguistic outsiders. See Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”: 181.
rooted in its terrain. One of the most powerful literary renditions of this paradox had come only two years prior to Ritratto: Pier Paolo Pasolini, who came to be one of the foremost novelists, film directors, and cultural critics of post-war Italy, worked on literary renditions of dialect—and bemoaned dialect’s progressive disappearance in favor of a homogenous common tongue—all his life. In an essay of 1952 devoted to dialect poetry produced in Rome and Milan, Pasolini remarked how a prominent author Milanese dialect poetry seemed to be possessed by a language he didn’t quite control,

Quasi che la lingua da lui usata sfuggisse a un certo momento ai suoi controlli, alle sue intenzioni (spesso così scoperte) e facesse un poeta che non è mai regredito nel parlante un “tipo” creato da essa: non un Milanese ma il Milanese—sia un uomo del popolo o della borghesia—come fantasma linguistico.34

[Almost as if the language he used escaped, at one moment, from his control, from his (often openly declared) intentions and made him—a poet who never regressed into a collective speaking subject—into a “character” produced by his own language: not a Milanese but the Milanese—be it a man of the people or of the bourgeoisie—as a linguistic ghost.]

Leydi, Berio and Maderna, and Pasolini make of the flawed utterances of their imagined Milanese nothing less than a distinguishing trait. What Berio and Maderna staged with the strangely barren voices in Ritratto, then, was a kind of twisted bind between embeddedness within locale, on the one hand, and linguistic abstraction, on the other. By the diktats of State Radio, to speak of Milan while in Milan was to speak in a voice cleansed of regional signifiers, a tongue that was nobody’s mother tongue. Yet this same voice had to be charged with a grafted grain: a reminder of abstract speech’s provenience from a particular body, from an urban ground concretely determined by lack of inflection.

The phonologically stripped word represents here the ghostly remainder of a state-wide spoken tongue naturalized as a Milanese orality, a site of production represented as a linguistic site of origin. It is to this representation that *Ritratto* lends its wry assent.

It is perhaps not surprising that in much scholarly discourse on the Studio up until the late 1990s—starting with Prieberg himself—*Ritratto* has been cited as the Studio’s opera prima; this position has been debunked by recent work, which has rightly pointed out *Ritratto*’s coarse assemblage, its pre-dating of the Studio’s official opening, and its functional *raison d’être* as evidence sufficient to cleave it from the Studio’s successive work on the voice. Indeed, it would be incorrect to bundle *Ritratto* into the same category—that of self-sufficient art composition—as later work on the voice carried out at the Studio di Fonologia. However, precisely because it is not an aesthetic object, *Ritratto* speaks with great precision about the conditions of possibility for the Studio di Fonologia as a linguistic, aesthetic, and political project. To be sure, Berio and Maderna’s linguistic and aesthetic parameters shifted, predictably, towards an embracing of the non-semantic aspects of human speech once they started working on bona-fide electronic compositions based on sampled human voices. As I mentioned earlier, however, *Ritratto* would also be their last piece to overtly feature the site of its production: Milan. *Thema* is centered around a particular place—the Ormond Hotel’s bustling lunch hours in 1904 Dublin—, in everyway seemingly distant from 1950s Milan. Subsequent works like *Visage* (1961) and *Invenzione su una voce* (1960) will not be centered in a place or a time. But the ghost of *logos*—an anxiety about the conditions of possibility of linguistic exchange—will continue to stubbornly haunt the production of the studio. As I will argue in the rest of this chapter, this same twisted structure, this same bind between linguistic
abstraction and commitment to locale, would feature in the Studio’s mission statement and, eventually, in the first successful electronic composition for voice produced at the Studio: Berio’s Thema.

1.3. “Musical Phonology” in Milan

The “Studio di Fonologia Musicale della RAI” opened its doors in the RAI headquarters on Milan’s Corso Sempione in June 1955. The name of the studio—which unusually juxtaposes a linguistic discipline with music—has been attributed to one of its head engineers, Gino Castelnuovo; but if Castelnuovo was key to the final coinage, by 1956 the complexities of term “phonology” had worked their way into the Studio’s aesthetic program.\(^{35}\) The Piedmontese Umberto Eco, who worked as a writer for RAI TV in the 1950s—and began frequenting the studio assiduously when collaborating with Berio on Thema in 1957—tells of the presence of key texts on “phonology” on the Studio’s bookshelf:

> My copy of Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique generale* is the one I have stolen from the Studio di Fonologia Musicale, and I must have stolen also [Nikolay] Trubetzoy. This is just to give you a sense of how, at the time, the focus of the Studio was on linguistic and phonological matters, about which I knew nothing…\(^{36}\)

It is possible, however, that Eco only got a chance to raid the Studio’s library when he began working with Berio in 1957, leaving us to wonder how long Saussure and

\(^{35}\) The attribution of the Studio’s name to Castelnuovo is made by Nicola Scaldaferrri. See Nicola Scaldaferrri, *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico: lo studio di fonologia di Milano e la ricerca musicale negli anni cinquanta* (Lucca: LIM, 1997), 67.

Trubetzkoy (whose *Principles of Phonology*, of 1939, is most likely the text Eco is referring to) had been on the shelf before his arrival—and who, exactly, had read them.

If we backtrack to 1956, for instance, we can hear the ghost of Saussure in the official mission statement for the Studio, penned by none other than Berio himself. The statement mentions:

> Un’attività di ricerca tuttora in preparazione, riguardante la memoria e la qualità di uno stimolo sonoro […] i rapporti tra audizione e fonazione, con speciale interesse alla voce cantata.  

Research activities that are in preparation, concerning memory and the quality of sonic stimulus […] the relationships between audition and phonation, with a special focus on the singing voice.

The words “phonation” and “audition”—terms straight out of Saussure’s *Cours*—hint at Berio’s familiarity with structural linguistics. Yet more striking is the peculiar reading of Saussurean linguistics Berio performs here; phonation, for Saussure, was an understanding of voice as a performance of a linguistic signifier: inflection, accent, and other aspects of the specific vocal utterance have no causal impact on signification. The fact that Saussure famously did not make of *parole* a cohesive and systematic part of his study of language has long been critiqued—by scholars of the voice such as Mladen Dolar—as a dismissal, or, to say it with Dolar, even as a symbolic murder.  

For Saussure—so the story goes—*phonè* had to be flattened into a diaphanous carrier of

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38 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 19: “The inaugural gesture of phonology was thus the total reduction of the voice as the substance of language. Phonology, true to its apocryphal terminology, was after killing the voice—its name is, of course, derived from the Greek *phonè*, voice, but in it one can also quite appropriately hear *phonos*, murder. Phonology stabs the voice with the signifying dagger; it does away with its flesh and blood.”
logos to become the subject of a systematic theory of language. Only recently has the work of scholars like Patrice Maniglier began to bring back to our eyes and ears the complexity of Saussure’s understanding of parole not as a brute datum to the senses with no inherent linguistic valence, but as an order of linguistic phenomena that could not be reduced to mere causality, hinting at modes of conceptual relations far beyond both causality and dichotomy. At stake in the Cours might have been, in fact, a prefiguration—rather than the mere object—of post-structuralist critiques.

It is important to note the unorthodoxy of Berio’s interest in Saussure—at least from the viewpoint of post-structuralist take-downs of Saussure which were beginning to brew around the mid-fifties in France. The juxtaposition of “phonation” with “singing” evokes the contradiction built into the Studio’s full name (the Studio of musical phonology), a name that now seems all the more tied to Berio’s linguistic musings. It is crucial that for Berio “phonation” went hand-in-hand with an attention to listening—not only “audition” but also the qualities of “sonic stimuli” independently of semantics. Phonology, then, might be taken here not as the default disappearance of voice into sign,

39 This is of course not absolutely untrue, and there are passages of the Cours that, if read in isolation, would yield such an understanding. See Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General in Linguistics (1916) (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1959), 18: “Do we really have the right to pretend that language exists independently of phonetic changes? Yes, for they affect only the material substance of words. If they attack language as a system of signs, it is only indirectly, through subsequent changes of interpretation; there is nothing phonetic in the phenomenon […] Determining the causes of phonetic changes may be of interest, and the study of sounds will be helpful on this point; but none of this is essential.”

but rather the study of the process by which the sounds of words—sung, inflected with accent or intonation—are produced.

Indeed, Maniglier points out that for Saussure, phonology was “the study of the mechanism of our [speech] organs,”41 a discipline concerned with the most carnal aspect of language production. It is striking that Saussure should give this nearly physiological definition to a word, “phonology,” which unlike “phonetics” has “logos” built into it. Nowadays, our understanding of phonetics-vs-phonology relies on the Prague linguists, and is a reversal of Saussure’s definition. The difference between the two terms had most famously been discussed by Nikolay Trubetzkoy in his *Principles of Phonology*, the very text that—in Eco’s account—flanked Saussure’ *Cour* on the Studio’s bookshelf. For Trubetzkoy, whereas phonetics concerns itself with cataloguing phonemes, mere physiological attributes of the voice, phonology approaches phonemes in their functional relation to a particular language.42 So which phonology—Saussure’s or Trubetzkoy’s—did Berio abide to? I would argue that his writings, and most of all his composition, show that he in fact conceived of phonology—musical phonology—as a complex splice of these two disciplines. At stake with Berio’s phonology is the implication of an exchange, a linguistic encounter stretched into a phenomenological question. And this is a

41 Saussure as quoted and commentated in Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes*, 101-102.
42 See Nikolay Trubetzkoy, *Fundamentals of Phonology* (1939) (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969), 3-4: “The ‘study of sound,’ that is, the science concerned with the elements of the signifier, has therefore always formed a special branch of linguistics, carefully differentiated from the “study of meaning.” […] Accordingly it would be advisable to institute in place of a single “study of sound” two “studies of sound,” one directed towards the act of speech, the other toward the language system. […] We designate the study of sound pertaining to the act of speech by the term phonetics, the study of sound pertaining to the system of language by the term phonology.”
phenomenology always twisted back towards *logos*, inflected by a desire to align the sound of words sung, inflected, and accented with social – and indeed political – intelligibility.

The studio’s insistence on the linguistic discipline of “phonology” has often been understood to borrow from its German predecessor, the Institut für Phonetik und Kommunikationsforschung at Bonn University. During the early 1950s, the Bonn Institut was led by composers such as Robert Beyer, Herbert Eimert, and Werner Meyer-Eppler, and conducted in-depth research into speech-writing and speech-synthesis techniques, providing impetus for the more famous electronic music studio at the West-Deutscher Rundfunk. Maderna had close relations with the Bonn Institut, to which he turned for one of his earliest electronic experiments, and whose materials he borrowed in order to compose the soundtrack to *Ritratto di città*. Yet the peculiarity of Italian anxieties about voice at midcentury lies in the minor but crucial shift between the two institutions’ titles: the change from the “phonetics” of Bonn to the “phonology” of Milan, with the cipher of logos built into it and yet strangely receding.43

Given the concern with the distribution and acquisition of language typical of Milan and of Milan’s RAI at midcentury, Berio’s re-imagining of phonation is hardly an idle aesthetic concern. His evocation of phonology leads us into intellectual lineage and epistemic genealogy of the Studio’s attention to the aurality of speaking and singing. Let

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43 The point about the difference between phonetics and phonology and its significance in Berio’s work has been made by Flo Menezes, in *Luciano Berio et la phonologie: une approche jakobsonienne de son œuvre* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993). Understandably, given the prevalently analytical nature of his work, Menezes does not connect this difference to broader cultural concerns.
us return to Berio’s mission statement quoted above; right after evoking Saussure, Berio writes that the focus on the singing voice,

si collega in parte con altri oggetti di ricerca riguardanti la musica popolare\textsuperscript{44} lo studio della quale, in questi ultimi tempi, ha subito un radicale rinnovamento sia nei concetti che nei metodi.\textsuperscript{45}

[is connected in part to other research goals concerning folk music, the study of which has, in recent times, undergone a radical renewal both on a conceptual and methodological level.]

The éminence grise behind this statement is none other than Alan Lomax, whose field recordings of Italian traditional songs date back to the years 1954-55; Lomax’s demonstration of the use of portable electronic technology for the purposes of building an archive of oral traditions had been seminal for the emergence, in those same years, of Italian ethnomusicology as an academic discipline.\textsuperscript{46}

Lomax had a direct relation with the Studio di Fonologia; in 1954, he had corresponded with Berio regarding experiments with the sonograph—a device that converted sound into phonetic notation. The written classification of sounds into phonemes—away from semantics—carried out via the sonograph was indicative of Lomax’s analytical method with regard to field recordings, a method he would make

\textsuperscript{44} In Italian post-war intellectuals circles, the term “musica popolare” indicated, quite literally, a music of “the people” intended, ideologically, as a subalternity composed of the working class and rural populations. It was therefore considered to be an oral tradition and something quite distinct from commercial pop.


\textsuperscript{46} Lomax’s assistant during his field trips to Italy, Diego Carpitella, became one of Italy’s leading ethnomusicologists; Carpitella was also part, in 1959, of a multi-disciplinary team of scholars led by the famous anthropologist Ernesto De Martino; they went to Apulia to conduct fieldwork, and produced a seminal text on tarantism. See Ernesto De Martino, \textit{La terra del rimorso: contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud} (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961).
public in 1959 as his now renowned “Cantometrics.” Although we cannot here delve into a review of Lomax’s work, it is worth mentioning a key detail. Cantometrics—a complex set of parameters for the sketching of relations between the contours of individual and collective singing and the political ordering of the society to which that singing belonged—famously renounced semantics and language as a core concern in favor of a physiological attention to voice. In his letter to Berio, Lomax mentioned sonographic analysis, expressing the hope that,

This purely physical approach will produce positive results. Then I shall go on to discuss a more direct physiological approach with a professor interested in the physiology of the voice.47

Lomax’s interest in speech-writing technology was aligned far more with Trubetzkoy’s “phonetics” than with “phonology;” yet beyond that, it would also become the means of formulating vocality’s unmediated relationship to the body politic at large, without the middleman of language. The systematic analysis of speech and song as mere sound—which was a necessary part of cantometrics—was also an aspect of the sometimes colonizing flavor of Lomax’s “samplings.”48 However, it is not surprising that Berio

48 This is, necessarily, a very cursory assessment of Lomax’s project. It is important to note that recent and innovative scholarship has re-evaluated the actuality of Cantometrics precisely because of its creation of a means of talking about voice in non-aestheticizing terms, of connecting it to politics without foregoing its flesh-like qualities. Perhaps, then, more than preliminarily excising language from voice as an object of analysis, it would be fairer to say that Lomax created a way of naming and analyzing a plethora of paralinguistic phenomena about the voice, thus effectively creating a language for vocal phenomena rather than taking an interest in the relation of language and voice at the level of phenomenon. On this topic see Elizabeth Travassos, “Ritos orales, cantometrics y otros pasos en dirección a una antropología de la voz,” A contratiempo, 14 (December 2009), available at
should have been interested in Lomax’s research: the technologically-mediated reduction of speech to sound would become an integral aspect of his poetics by the time he started working on *Thema* in 1957. And yet what in Lomax was a preliminary methodological renunciation became, for the Studio, a stage in a process in which the sounds words were heard in a tense state of potentiality towards intelligible language—*logos*, again, as the ultimate—but not necessarily immediate—destination of phonological attention. The comparison between Lomax and the Studio di Fonologia’s project—and their differing, but somehow complementary relationship towards language—can also be understood in terms of engagement with locale. Lomax could work on the voice as he did because of exclusive interest in rural milieus with relatively homogenous speaking practices; the Studio’s interest in language implied, as I have argued, a focus, aurally and politically, on the city. The apparent dichotomy between the two—and even implied distinction, that sets up the country as preceding the city—has long been shown to mask a deep entwinement. In Raymond Williams’ famous analysis of this issue, country is shown as the originary myth that grounds the city, its ideological offspring and a way of masking the flows of labor that connect the two. Williams writes of English commentary upon English urbanization and rurality, but to apply the analysis to Lomax and Berio means to bring in a further element of geopolitics. Lomax, an envoy from the wealthiest state among of Post-War Western powers, saw Italy as the South of Europe, a rural periphery of urbanized central Europe; the cosmopolitan Milanese avant-


garde both internalized this view—which dates back to the French Enlightenment—and fought against it by making their symbolic milieu intensely urban.\textsuperscript{50}

In the intellectual communities of post-war Milan, the relationship between speech and politics had been brought to the fore by the work of one of the most important intellectual influences on the Italian post-war, Antonio Gramsci—whose work drew heavily on his training as a linguist. The founder of the Italian Communist Party (1921) as well as the author of a monumental political history of the Italian peninsula—Gramsci had died in prison in 1937. His \textit{Prison Diaries} were published posthumously by the Turin editor Einaudi in 1948, and in them he famously drew a direct connection between Italy’s lack of a nationally spoken language and its political failures, including, of course, Fascism. Gramsci’s impact on Italian anxieties regarding language lay with his critique of Italian politics, which hinged on the question of intelligibility, a critique that included a brief but striking condemnation of one of the most celebrated exports of post-unification Italy—Risorgimento opera:

\begin{quote}
La musica verdiana, o meglio il libretto e l’intreccio dei drammi musicati da Verdi sono responsabili di tutta una serie di atteggiamenti “artificiosi” di vita popolare, di modi di pensare, di uno “stile” nella vita della gente. […] I romanzi d’appendice e da sottoscala (tutta la letteratura sdolcinata, melliflua, piagnolosa) prestano eroi ed eroine, ma il melodrama è il più pestifero, perché le parole musicate si ricordano di più e formano come delle matrici in cui il pensiero prende una forma nel suo fluire.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{50} For an analysis of the constitution of Europe’s southern states as a periphery of Enlightened civilization during the French Enlightenment and German post-Enlightenment and Idealism, see Roberto Dainotto, \textit{Europe (In Theory)} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

\textsuperscript{51} Antonio Gramsci, \textit{Quaderni dal Carcere} (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 969. Translated in English as \textit{Prison Notebooks}, trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), vol. 3, 263. I have here modified Buttigieg’s translation in order to highlight both the figure of pestilence (as something highly contagious) in Gramsci’s
Verdi’s music, or rather the libretti and plots of the plays set to music by Verdi, is responsible for a whole series of “artificial” attitudes, for ways of thinking, and for a “style” in the life of the people. […] The serial novel and popular genres (all saccharine, mellifluous, mournful literature) provide heroines and heroes, but melodrama is the most pestiferous because words set to music are easier to memorize—they become like matrices in which thought is molded into shape as it flows through.

Gramsci’s attack encapsulates his concern with language: in Risorgimento opera the versified Italian of nineteenth-century libretti—unintelligible to most inhabitants of mid-nineteenth century Italy—was invested, via the incisiveness of melos, with a memorable meaning devoid of semantics. Yet what is at stake in his statement here is not so much a general condemnation of music, but a political semiotics of the singing voice. For Gramsci, the urban bourgeoisie used music as a way of effacing—rather than overcoming—the linguistic gap between their literacy and the dialectal oral cultures of those beneath them. The “words set to music” in opera are despicable to him because they are the vulgarization of landmarks of bourgeois ideology: subject-against-society dynamics, heightening of individual sentiment, pieties regarding the poor. Yet they are not absorbed through readership, or even through language, but through the affect of vocal melody, an affect that commands attention and memory beyond logos. It is this masking of the literate and linguistic through the aural and non-linguistic that grieves Gramsci. Gramsci identifies in the operatic voice the ineffable affect of a literate bourgeois ideology working its way into the aural life of working and rural classes.

Coming of age as left-wing artists in the early 1950s, both Berio and Maderna were exposed, directly or indirectly, to Gramsci’s linguistic, historical, and economic metaphor for opera’s effects, and the image of thought as something whose flow is shaped but not arrested.
analyses of Italy. Maderna, who had joined the Partito Comunista Italiano in 1952, had
set one of Gramsci’s prison letters as part of a twelve-tone cantata in 1953. It is not
difficult to hear after-echoes of Gramsci’s disdain for bel canto opera in Berio’s initial
pleas for an Italian electronic music studio, such as his review of a concert of Tape Music
held at the MoMA in 1953. Roused by American electronic experiments to the need for a
homegrown Italian electronic compositional school, he complained that,

Nessuno dei giovani musicisti italiani ha fino ad ora potuto ‘consumare’
con serietà, in patria, esperienze elettroniche di sorta. Tenori e mandolini
sono evidentemente i privilegi che, al momento, si preferiscono ancora
riscattare. 52

[Up until now, none of the young Italian musicians has been able
genuinely to take advantage of electronic innovations in their home
country. It seems that tenors and mandolins remain, even today, the main
assets we like to bank on.]

Berio identifies the conservatism of Italy with an iconic timbre: the tenor and mandolin
combination, the standard instrumentation of nineteenth-century Neapolitan love songs
and serenades. Although his remark is but a passing mention compared to Gramsci’s
pointed critique, it is striking that Berio’s scapegoating here implicitly plays—as did
Gramsci’s—on matters of oral and literary tradition. The reason behind Berio’s choice of
Neapolitan song as a negative signifier of Italian musical life at large was its life as the
literate, bourgeois appropriation of an oral dialectal tradition. As Berio would have
known, the Neapolitan melodies performed by tenors and mandolins often share the
arched contour and regular bar structures of bel canto melody, indicating a compositional

disciplining of local oral tradition not unlike Gramsci’s decried effect of opera on the
aurality of the dialect speaking subaltern.

Berio’s disdain for tenors and mandolins, however, had a positive counterpart: the
field recording. Like many of his contemporaries Berio nurtured a belief in the ability of
recording technology to bypass writing and yield sonic events in their essence. “The
symbols of electronic music,” Berio wrote in 1956, “are sounds themselves, in their
objective physical reality.” As mentioned in the previous section, Berio was familiar
with the composer whose work most famously incarnated this particular conceit: Pierre
Schaeffer. Indeed, Berio’s interest in the modes of perception of the voice might
suggest—beyond Saussurean linguistics, Lomax’s sonographs, and burgeoning
Gramscian concerns with intelligibility across classes—also a debt to a dominant
Milanese intellectual practice of the midcentury: a peculiar appropriation of Husserlian
phenomenology, particularly the work of Antonio Banfi.

Banfi, professor of philosophy at the University of Milan since 1932, and the
main conduit for the translation and diffusion of Husserl’s writings in Italy, was one of
the most important intellectuals of 1950s Milan. Not only a philosopher, Banfi was also
the Senate representative of Lombardy in the Italian parliament between 1948 and 1958,
and—as were many Italian intellectuals at midcentury—a committed Marxist. He took
phenomenology as a mode of discovering, within one’s very surroundings, within the
space of the city itself, new forms of philosophical knowledge worked out—as Husserl

53 Luciano Berio, “Prospettive nella musica: ricerche ed attività dello Studio di
simboli della musica elettronica sono i suoni stessi nella loro obiettiva realtà fisica.”
would have had it—from the perceptual encounter with things. Banfi’s work was well known at RAI. The director of RAI’s Third Programme, musicologist Luigi Rognoni, was a student of Banfi and a close ally of Berio and Maderna’s project; another important affiliate of the Studio, the philosopher Enzo Paci, was also among Banfi’s students; even some journalists at RAI were known to attend Banfi’s classes at the university.

The fact that Banfi’s classes spawned two of the studio’s most prominent intellectual allies is a key detail, as is the fact that voice and language featured prominently in their work; it was Rognoni who, in 1962, would suggest to Maderna that one of his last pieces for the Studio (Le Rire) should be entitled after the ever-enigmatic act of laughter. Paci, who had become professor of theoretical philosophy in Milan in

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54 Banfi’s phenomenological school was, it is important to note, a reaction against the philosophy of Benedetto Croce, whose rather rigid take on idealism was considered, in the years of economic rebirth after the end of World War II, obsolete.

55 Ada Ferrari, for instance, reports that the radio-journalist Pino Mezzera also informally attended Banfi’s classes in Milan. See Ada Ferrari, Milano e la RAI: un incontro macato?, 96.

56 The anecdote on Le Rire is recounted in Luigi Rognoni, “Memoria di Bruno Maderna negli Anni Cinquanta,” in Rossana Dalmonte, Mario Baroni, eds., Bruno Maderna: Documenti (Milan: Suvini Zerboni, 1985), 146-151:150: “Ricordo come nacque Le rire, nel 1962, l’ultima composizione di Bruno di quell periodo. Aveva registrato la voce di Marino Zuccheri e poi l’aveva elaborata con suoni sinusoidali, filtri e sovrapposizioni. Quando l’ascoltai, gli dissi che mi sembrava una dimostrazione che Bergson aveva dato del riso: ‘quelche chose de mécanique plaquée sur du vivant.’ Ebbene, mi disse, lo intitoleremo Le rire.” It is also worth noting that, in his seminal study of the Second Viennese School of 1966, Rognoni also framed the cultural milieu around Schoenberg’s abandonment of tonality in overtly vocal and linguistic terms: “In art, in literature and in theater, the theme [of the conflict between the material and the spiritual, between the rational and the irrational] takes specific form in the Ur-schrei, the sudden ‘primal cry,’ while artists sought their means of expression in the immediacy of the Ur-laut, in the immediacy of language as ‘indistinct sound’ which aims at transcending semantic limitations.” Luigi Rognoni, The Second Vienna School: Expressionism and Dodecaphony (1966) (London: John Calder, 1977), 1. The first version of this monograph, entitled Espressionismo e dodecafonia, was published in 1954, by which
1957, was not a musicologist, but his work on the intersection of linguistics and phenomenology was very influential for literary and musical avant-gardes of the 1960s; in 1951, he had founded the literary journal *Aut, aut*, to which he would contribute, between 1963-1974, a regular column entitled “Il senso delle parole” (the sense of words). Perhaps most poignantly for our purposes, it was also Paci who, in 1957—the year of his settling in Milan—would thus describe, in one of his personal notebooks, a sleepless night in the city:


[It is half past three in the morning. I look out of the window. Distant noises of trucks. The houses are incomprehensible. It seems to me impossible that they can stand there, indifferent, while so much human life is contained within their walls. A drunkard passes by. He cries out. The philosopher: he not only thinks about the world, but also lives it, constantly perceives it anew with all of his senses, as a looming question. Perhaps these words and cries beg for an impossible solution? Then, silence comes. A silence that is full, vibrant. A backdrop upon which things draw themselves untouched, newly born now, in this very moment. And things now take on a meaning, they become translucent, they let us know their idea of truth.]

time Rognoni was actively backing Berio and Maderna’s proposal for an electronic music studio.

The columns are now collected in a single publication as Enzo Paci, *Il senso delle parole*, Piero Rovatti, ed. (Milan: Bompiani, 1987).

Paci appears to experience here something akin to a phenomenological reduction—a defamiliarization of known objects and events that in traditional Husserlian phenomenology is an intentional act of perception. Yet for Paci, the moment of defamiliarization originates as much in the urban surroundings as it does in the philosopher’s will. Phenomenological reduction is not only intentionality applied to the city, that is, but performed spontaneously at the meeting point between urban landscape and the observer’s senses. Note that the vocal connotation is here especially strong. More than the houses, the darkness, the screeching trucks, it is the unintelligible cry of the drunkard that prompts the turn from description to philosophical reflection. The anxiety of mapping the inarticulate vocal sound into signification becomes proper to Paci’s condition as a thinker: he celebrates the fresh encounter with the material surface of things, but also wonders about “the solution” that these inchoate vocal sounds demand of the philosopher harkening to the city.

Many of the elements of Paci’s journal entry are the same as those of *Ritratto*—the linguistics of the urban voice, and the advent of silence as an atmosphere of tense potentiality related to the human voice in particular. There is, however, a noticeable difference between the ghostly voice of mankind of *Ritratto* and Paci’s drunkard, a difference best understood in terms of the role of *logos*. The voice *Ritratto*’s accountant is made diaphanous by the ideological demand for the spread of a spoken common tongue, while the drunkard’s voice is completely opaque, lifted from semantics. Still, the return of *phonè* is here a productive moment, a state of potentiality pointing towards a new, better language announced as a messianic event. Rather than being the concrete property of the Milanese voice—as in *Ritratto*—*logos* here is the dutiful, but obscure
destination of the philosopher’s hearing of urban space. By 1981, Berio would quote Paci as a “compagno di strada” (fellow traveller) to the Studio di Fonologia’s experiments, and Paci would eventually publish an essay on the phenomenology of contemporary music in the Studio’s academic journal, *Incontri musicali*, in 1960. Yet already in 1957—well before Paci took up an active interest in contemporary music—we can find, beyond the common denominator of music, a deeper link between the Studio’s credo and Paci’s intimate reflections on the linguistic phenomenology of the city. The drunkard’s cry that haunts Paci could be taken as the key to Berio’s half-turn away from the functionality of Saussurean phonology: the gap between *phonè* and *logos* reconceived as an existential condition proper to the city.

1.4. *Thema* and the placeless space of speech

The cry of the drunkard described by Paci resonates with Berio’s work at the Studio: both belong to a common network that joins the northern Italian city with anxieties about the linguistics of the voice, anxieties that found their concrete breeding ground in the crucible of State-run media that was Milan’s RAI in the 1950s. Consider Berio’s *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, his first extended composition at the Studio di Fonologia to use the voice as its sole material, and one of his most celebrated works. It consists of 6’13’’ minutes of elaborate manipulations (fragmentation, filtering, superimposition, varied

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playback speeds) of a two-minute recording of Cathy Berberian declaiming a passage from Joyce’s *Ulysses*.\(^6\) *Thema* can be considered the first composition to bear the weight of the Studio’s phonological research—an exploration of the threshold between intelligible speech and non-signifying vocal utterance.\(^6\) Yet what marks *Thema*’s kinship to Paci’s intimate Milanese phenomenological diary is, above all, the heightened attention to the space surrounding the speaking voice.

This is a characteristic detectable as early as *Thema*’s opening two seconds: we hear four or five (it is hard to determine) voices in the alto to soprano range, all speaking softly, each pronouncing only one word, though the word uttered appears to be slightly different in every voice. We appear to be hearing a group of people speak all at once: but the vocal range is too narrow, the dynamics too hushed—the words too phonetically alike for any single word or individual voice to emerge. It is as if we were hearing a single voice distorted by an overly reverberant space, a word enshrouded by the halo of its own sound. This is hardly field-recorded babble: the recording is clean of ambience noise, and the stacked words align into a clear rhythmic attack—a quick short-short-long figuration,

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\(^6\) In his recent and thoughtful article on *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*, Antonio di Scipio makes the choice of referring to the recording of *Thema* approved by the composer himself, which consists of Cathy Berberian’s declamation of the *Ulysses* excerpt and the subsequent manipulations spliced into a single, 8’13’’ long track. However, my timings will refer to *Thema* as the 6’13’’ section of Berio’s manipulations of Berberian’s recorded declamation only, both for ease of reference (I do not carry out any analytic work on the declamation), and also because this is the form in which the composition is most widely known, despite the composer’s rather late-in-the-day correction of this practice.\(^6\) As work by Scaldaferri has shown, *Thema* emerged within a constellation of electronic compositions that explored the voice—for instance, Pierre Schaeffer’s *Symphonie pur un homme seul* (1952) or Stockhausen’s *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1956), the latter of which was well known and deeply admired by Berio. See Nicola Scaldaferri, *Musica nel laboratorio elettroacustico. Lo Studio di fonologia di Milano e la ricerca musicale negli anni Cinquanta* (Lucca: LMI, Quaderni di Musica/Realtà, 1997).
almost martial. The effect is that of an interpellation to be registered, but not understood, across space. In other words, it is a spectacular, staged mishearing of an utterance released into a common, reverberant space shared by a remote speaker and us, the listeners.

The opening of Thema presents us with a much more material treatment of the voice than we heard in the diaphanous “voice of mankind” offered up in Ritratto. We hear, that is, speech in which semantics are masked and the vocal delivery is highlighted. In the case of the opening of Thema, this “masking” of semantics and subsequent attention to the voice’s material qualities is effected through the crafting of an imaginary acoustic environment, a resonance chamber whose echo blurs articulation. This procedure is the result of a patented compositional device, which Berio terms “word chord.” In “Poesia e musica: un’esperienza,” an exegetic essay on Thema published in Incontri Musicali in 1958, Berio describes this device in detail, thus revealing an intensely spatial conception of the sounds of speech themselves:

Si è perciò ritornati alla registrazione originale del solo testo inglese, classificando e riunendo in accordi quasi tutte le parole presenti nel testo secondo una scala di colori vocali—una serie in un certo senso—che si estende dall’A alla U, compresi i dittonghi. La disposizione originale di questa serie corrisponde [...] alle successive posizione dei punti di risonanza dell’apparato vocale.\footnote{Luciano Berio, “Poesia e musica: un’esperienza,” Incontri Musicali, No. 3 (1959), 98-112, reptd. in Luciano Berio, Scritti sulla musica, Angela Ida De Benedictis, ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 2013), 251-266: 261. It is important to note that the text of the documentary Omaggio a Joyce, originally meant to accompany Thema, has a section specifically on formants.}

[We have thus gone back to the original recording of the English text, and classified and gathered into chords almost all of the words present in the text according to a vocal color palette—a sort of series—going from A to U, including}
diphthongs. The original disposition of this series corresponds to the successive points of resonance of the vocal apparatus.]

By ordering and stacking words with similar formants—the technical term for the points of resonance of the vocal apparatus Berio mentions—he conceived of words themselves as articulations of the body’s inner resonance chambers. A carnal conception of the voice in space, then, but one that remains tied to articulate speech. Formants are mostly a property of vowels—sounds, that is, in which the throat and mouth resonate without the stopping of glottis, teeth, or tongue—and so for Berio to have retained the consonants that connect the vowels within words was a particular aesthetic decision. He retained the contour of speech instead of working with isolated phonemes, thus delineating, even through such sophisticated electronic manipulation, a potentiality for logos.

The simultaneous attention to speech and to a mercurial acoustic space is a key conceptual and compositional aspect of Thema. It was, for instance, not only the first composition from the Studio di Fonologia systematically to explore voice, but also the first one to be conceived in four-track spatialization. Besides compositional matters, the primary literature produced by Berio and Umberto Eco on Thema also treats the concept

63 In fact, Berio writes specifically about the work of welding together consonants with different phonetic traits for the purpose of word-chords, thus rendering articulation more flexible. Berio, “Poesia e musica,” 262: “Con diverse velocità di distribuzione e con accostamenti più o meno densi, sono state raggruppate quelle consonanti che il nostro apparato vocale difficilmente avvicina. Questi incontri artificiali di consonanti (soprattutto successioni rapide di unvoiced and voiced stop consonants: b-p, t-d, ch-g) hanno permesso una evoluzione decisiva verso una più grande ricchezza di articolazione.” [With different speeds of distribution and with juxtaposition of varying density, we have grouped those consonants that our vocal apparatus struggles to join. These artificial groups of consonants (especially rapid successions of unvoiced and voiced stop consonants: b-p, t-d, ch-g) have permitted a neat evolution towards a greater richness of articulation.]
of space—and the space of spoken utterances—as an important trait of the composition. The opening of the essay “Poesia e musica” quoted earlier has Berio expound on how,

Una nuova sensibilità dello spazio in generale—ivi compresi anche gli artifizi tipografici—hanno certe contribuito a dare una nuova apertura alle dimensioni espressive della parola poetica, o meglio, alle possibilità poetiche della parola stampata, compresa, detta. Già sappiamo come possiamo ritrovare nella musica […] questa presenza dello spazio attorno alla parola poetica, di cui il nero su bianco della pagina non è che un aspetto.64

[A new sensibility of space in general—including typographical artifice—has certainly contributed towards broadening the expressive dimension of the poetic word, or rather, to the poetic possibilities of the word printed, understood, said aloud. We already know that we can find in music this presence of space around the poetic word, of which the black and white on the page is only one aspect.]

Yet for all this focus on matters of resonant spaces, _Thema_ is not a composition about an identifiable place, a locale with semiotic and linguistic connotations. Unlike _Ritratto_, for instance, it makes no reference to Milan, or indeed to anywhere. It is based on snippets of recorded speech that are from studio recordings rather than from a live recording; moreover, it makes exclusive use of speech in a foreign language—English—and of a literary excerpt by an author—James Joyce—whose experimental use of English notoriously verges on the nonsensical. If _Thema_ is a piece that explores the spatial

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64 Berio, “Poesia e musica,” 253: “Una nuova sensibilità dello spazio in generale—ivi compresi anche gli artifizi tipografici—hanno certe contribuito a dare una nuova apertura alle dimensioni espressive della parola poetica, o meglio, alle possibilità poetiche della parola stampata, compresa, detta. Già sappiamo come possiamo ritrovare nella musica—con funzioni più complesse ancora a causa della presenza insostituibile dell’interprete—questa presenza dello spazio attorno alla parola poetica, di cui il nero su bianco della pagina non è che un aspetto.”
aspects of vocal utterances, then it does so in a space that is oddly *placeless*—and, what is more, geopolitically indeterminate.

We could map the contradiction of combining a sensuous rendition of the spatial qualities of listening to voice with a highly abstracted approach to place onto *Thema*’s broader relationship to the Studio and to Milan. Examined from the vantage point of the Studio’s linguistic and anthropological ambitions of 1956—ambitions that were very much grounded in Milan—*Thema* constitutes a steep departure, a strong move towards abstraction. One might even say that *Thema*—relying as it does on prestigious literature in a foreign language—was crafted with a high-brow, international audience in mind. And entice them it did: *Thema* went on to have quite a successful musical life of its own—first as a concert piece, and then as part of several LP collections and, by the 1990s, on CD: it is included in anthologies of electronic music to this day and has warranted a rich analytical bibliography.\(^\text{65}\) Yet *Thema* is also part of a thick legitimizing discourse tied to the radiophonic medium and to the Studio di Fonologia. It was originally meant to be part of a lengthy Italian-language radio documentary on the phenomenon of onomatopoeia and its relation to electronic composition for voice. The

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\(^{65}\) *Thema* has done extremely well as a stand-alone piece of avant-garde art music. It had two separate releases as a commercial LP in 1958 (LP Turnabout TV 34177) and 1959 (LP Limelight LS 86047); the tape was then restored and released as a CD in 1995 (CD BMG 09026-68302-2). A further CD version—not restored—was released in 1991 as CD BVHaast 9109. Recently, *Thema* was even featured (uniquely among the Studio’s musical offerings) in a prestigious 7 volume anthology of noise and electronic music released by Belgian label Sub Rosa between 2001 and 2013 (CD Sub Rosa, SR300). The documentary *Omaggio a Joyce* has been released as part of the attached CD to the previously quoted *Nuova Musica alla Radio: Esperienze allo Studio di Fonologia della RAI di Milano* (Rome: RAI ERI, 2001). The text of *Omaggio a Joyce* is also published in *Nuova Musica alla Radio*, 341-356. Since then, a section of *Omaggio a Joyce*—a brief excerpt of Berberian’s reading overlaid on top of itself as a polyphonic stretto—was remixed (uncredited) by noise band Crystal Castles in 2007.
documentary—a collaboration between Berio and Eco—was written and recorded but, like *Ritratto*, never broadcast.\textsuperscript{66} *Thema* was also—unlike its equally celebrated sibling compositions from this period, such as Maderna’s *Dimensioni II/Invenzione su una voce* (1960) and Berio’s *Visage*—the subject of an essay published by Berio himself in 1958 for *Incontri Musicali*. In other words, to become the highly regarded aesthetic object it is today, *Thema* had to shed a husk: it has to lose the traces of its function within the legitimizing discourse of Milan’s electroacoustic laboratory.

The hybrid relationship to the site of production is the source of a tension that transverses the structural aspects of the composition, as well as the piece’s historiography within the institution of the Studio. We find it elements of this tension in the piece’s relationship to literature. If the use of Joyce’s text signals a departure from the interest in local oral cultures, and the linguistics of speech, it is also remarkable that the specific passage chosen for *Thema* concerns specifically the aural experience of a particular site—the author’s own home city, and specifically Dublin’s *Ormond’s Pub* at dinnertime.\textsuperscript{67} The


\textsuperscript{67} It is also important to note that within *Ulysses*, the eleventh chapter is related to sound according to several of the overlapping symbolic narrative structures at play in the book. It is the chapter that corresponds to the encounter between Ulysses and the Sirens; the chapter corresponding to the sense of hearing; and the chapter also devoted to sonic arts and music. What is more, Joyce famously declared in his correspondence that the overture of the chapter contains “the eight regular parts of a *fuga per canonem*.” See James Joyce, letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver, 6 August 1919, in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, Richard Ellmann, ed. (London: Faber, 1975), 242. Berio and Eco were well aware of the sonic symbolism behind the eleventh chapter: the documentary *Omaggio a Joyce*,
pub’s bustle is depicted as heard and mused upon by the novel’s protagonist, Leopold Bloom. The excerpt, found at the beginning of the eleventh chapter of *Ulysses*, exemplifies the Joycean flow of consciousness—albeit a consciousness that is filtered almost exclusively through the sense of hearing. This literary conceit yields a text so saturated with onomatopoeic language and juxtaposed, grammatically loose fragments that is near-incomprehensible to the reader:

Bronze by gold heard the hoofitrons,
Steely ringing imperthnthn thnthnthn.
Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.
Horrid! And gold flushed more.
A husky fifenote blew.
Blew. Blue bloom is on the
Gold pinnacled hair.
A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin,
Rose of Castille.
Trilling, trilling: I dolores.
Peep! Who’s in the... peepofgold?
Tink cried to bronze in pity.
And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying call.
Decoy. Soft word. But look! The bright stars fade. O rose! Notes

for instance, opens with a quotation from Book XII of Homer’s Odyssey (the encounter with the Sirens); Berio also writes in “Poesie e musica,” 256 that “le *Sirene* [i.e. chapter 11 of Joyce’s *Ulysses*] si rifanno a una tecnica narrativa che è stata suggerita a Joyce da un procedimento musicale tra i più classici: la Fuga per canonem.”

Analyses of *Thema* rich with philosophical detail regarding the voice have recently been published by Nicola Scaldaferr and Agostino di Scipio, whose work I have already mentioned, as well as Romina Daniele’s “Il dialogo con la materia disintegrata e ricomposta’: *Un’analisi di Thema (omaggio a Joyce) di Luciano Berio* (Milan: RDM Records, 2010). Nicola Scaldaferr has also published two important essays that provide technological and cultural context for *Thema*. They are “Aesthetic and technological aspects in Berio’s *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)*,” *Science, Philosophy and Music: XXth International Congress of History of Science Proceedings* (Turnhout, BE: Brepols Editions, 2002), 207-215, which provides crucial detail on the (to this day unexamined) process of spatialization; and most recently “The Voice and the Tape: Aesthetic and Technological Interactions in the European Studios during the 1950s” in *Crosscurrents. American and European Music in Interactions 1900–2000*, Felix Meyer, Carol J. Oja, Wolfgang Rathert, and Anne C. Shreffler, eds. (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press for the Paul Sacher Stiftung, 2014), 335-350.
Chirruping answer. Castille. The morn is breaking.
Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.
Coin rang. Clock clacked.
Smack. La cloche! Thigh smack. Avowal. Warm. Sweetheart, 
Goodbye!69

As Joyce’s chapter unfolds, all the words jumbled together in the opening two pages are found again as part of a more coherent narrative structure revolving around Leopold Bloom’s visit to the Ormond Pub. Bronze and Gold, for instance, turn out to have been referring to the two barmaids of the Ormond Pub, thus nicknamed by Bloom because of their complexions. The “steelyringing hoofirons” is a passing carriage overheard from the window of the pub, while “Imperthnthnthnthn” is the mocking retort of a costumer who has just been called “impertinent” by one of the barmaids—and so on. By the end of the chapter, the opening two pages become intelligible not as abstract experimentation with language, but as a rendition of Bloom’s hearing of the Ormond pub, recorded in detail through a linguistic device that captures not only snippets of intelligible speech, but the unconscious sense-making perceived through the din of inanimate objects: cutlery, glasses, coins.70

Joyce’s language is, in other words, a transcription device, lending linguistic status to all aspects of audible human experience. Such extended linguistic power is

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70 One of the theorists who has most worked at the connection between language and the experience of the city in *Ulysses* is Henri Lefebvre, who mentions Joyce repeatedly in his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991) (New York: Verso Books, 2014). Aside from the author’s own overt engagement with Joyce, key concepts elaborated by Lefebvre such as the “production of space,” understood as the relationship between lived-in space, formalized space and imagined or represented space, are used as analytic and hermeneutic tools in recent Joyce scholarship. See for instance Valérie Bénéjam and John Bishop, eds. *Making Space in the Works of James Joyce* (New York & Oxon: Routledge, 2011).
purchased at the cost of is comprehensibility: Joyce’s writing famously courts the nonsensical. It is therefore striking that Berio adapted Joyce’s transcription technique for the voice, lending the same extensive, all-notating power to make into language—and the same tendency towards the nonsensical—not to writing, but to the act of speaking. Cathy Berberian strikingly described the piece thus:

In […] the chapter from *Ulysses*, Joyce introduces the element of noise through the onomatopoeia. The text becomes the verbal sonorization of a scene in a public place, a sort of recording. On this literary ‘recording’ is based one of the best works in the field of electronic music: *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* by Luciano Berio. Here I must say that the recording and editing techniques have played a fundamental role in vocal music. The fact that with a tape-recorder you can record one or more sounds, isolate them from their context, listen to them as they are, as sound, modify and combine them with other acoustic elements from different contexts; all this has given the musician (and the singer) the possibility of a different listening of reality and of all those acoustic facts that normally would escape us, since they are absorbed and masked by the action producing or provoking them.⁷¹

Striking here is the comparison Berberian makes between Joyce’s chapter and a sound recording—a field recording. We are reminded of Berio’s professed interest in oral cultures and field recordings, his belief in recording technology as a mode of capturing sonic events, an interest that has by now undergone radical mutation. For if Joyce’s chapter is to be taken as a recording, it is a recording whose technological cognate is not the needle and wax cylinder, but the capacity for inscribing aural experience into a linguistic form: a fantastically enhanced ear phonoautograph whose mechanism not only connected to the bones of the ear, but also extended to the capacity to hear as language. Indeed, the evocation of recording technology in relation to Joyce’s linguistic

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representation of the aurality of a public space gets at what media historian Lisa Gitelman identified as the linguistic and textual undercurrent of Edison’s phonograph—and its relationship to the complex practice of short-hand transcription. According to Gitelman, the fundamental tension uncovered by the retrieval of the linguistic and textual aspects of Edison’s invention is the tortuous, non-linear path between “the legible representation of aural experience and some more perfect, legible reproduction of that same thing.”\(^{72}\) We could think of the relationship between Joyce’s text and Berio’s work upon it as a revised version of this path, one in which the storing of the illegible, rather than of the legible, is the goal of transcriptive work. The focus on the negative aspect of transcription—on the sounds that defy linguistic encoding—has the effect of rendering the medium—the transcribing body, but also the recording apparatus—thick, cumbersome, an obstacle to transparent reproduction that lands us squarely back into the realm of representation.

It is also important to note that the category at the heart of Berberian’s quote is not noise, but something closer to language. Not by coincidence, “noise” is a term she mentions only once, and then immediately qualifies as being mediated through onomatopoeia—a concept we will take up in the next paragraph. At stake here are rather the illegible and unintelligible; categories that, while they include phenomena that are linguistically opaque, also imply an inoculated tendency—however frustrated—towards logos. In order to elucidate the singularity of this take on noise, we might bring this idea to bear upon one of the most powerful ideologies of midcentury electroacoustic music: Pierre Schaeffer’s “reduced listening.” In terms strikingly akin to Schaeffer’s own,

Berberian muses on recording technology’s ability to yield sounds “isolated from their context,” so that one may listen to them “as they are.” Yet her idea of Joyce as a field recording gives away a fundamental shift in the understanding of this supposedly impartial mode of listening. The truth to be uncovered by “reduced listening” is not, that is, a generic attention to one’s own hearing, but a tendency towards the linguistic—what Hans Georg Gadamer coined “linguisticality”—present in all human listening and thus, in all sonic phenomena as heard by humans.73

Within the coordinates sketched by Berberian, music becomes the reading, the decoding of the groove left by this linguistic transcription. Not, then, a recording of the space of the Ormond Pub, but the vocal remediation of something already notated through language, an enactment, perhaps of the very moment in which a sound is heard as language. Here we should pay close attention to Berberian’s initial emphasis of “onomatopoeia.” Although mentioned only in passing in Berio’s “Poesia e musica,” “onomatopoeia” was the key concept behind the original documentary accompanying Thema. Indeed the documentary’s full subtitle is documenti sulla qualità onomatopeica del linguaggio poetico (documentation of the onomatopeic quality of poetic language). The significance of this term—and of the unorthodox interpretation Berio and Eco gave to it—is key to the role of listening to space in Thema, and is worth retracing quickly. The documentary proper begins—after the announcement of the title—with the following words:

C’è un momento nella vita del linguaggio in cui la parola, prima di ogni convenzione, da puro segno diventa una sola cosa con ciò che viene nominato. È

Onomatopoeia—the making of signifiers by way of the imitation of the signified’s sound—is here brought forth as a moment of linguistic origin, a moment that signals a clean break with the Saussurean undertones of the Studio’s mission statement. The notion of a sonic and material connection between the linguistic sign and that which it signifies was alien to Saussure, who saw vocal utterances as the (mere) performance of an arbitrary linguistic sign and never in terms of the forces behind the creation and acquisition of new words.75

Yet the concept of “onomatopoeia” in Omaggio a Joyce is far more than a gesture, but the backbone of a lengthy argument that leads us far beyond Saussure and its discontents. For Berio and Eco, onomatopoeia does not primarily have to do with the proper moment of naming things, but is rather a vast, open-ended process of imitation


75 The section devoted to onomatopoeia in Saussure’s Cours is brief and puzzling: Saussure admits that onomatopoeia could be used as proof of the non-arbitrary relationship of sign and signified, but then produces examples of how onomatopoeic words are not exempt from phonetic and semantic modification across history, which does not address the issue of whether they were arbitrary to begin with, nor whether historical change (which Saussure dismisses as “fortuitous phonetic evolution”) makes their relation to their signified arbitrary. See Saussure, General Course in Linguistics, 69: “Onomatopoeia might be used to prove that the choice of the signifier is not always arbitrary. […] Words like French fouet ‘whip’ or glas 'knell' may strike certain ears with suggestive sonority, but to see that they have not always had this property we need only examine their Latin forms (fouet is derived from fagus 'beech-tree,' glas from dassimmim 'sound of a trumpet'). The quality of their present sounds, or rather the quality that is attributed to them, is a fortuitous result of phonetic evolution.”
that endows all kinds of sound with a primal linguistic charge. The examples presented by Berio for onomatopoeia start with “anthropological” case studies such as the kinship between an unspecified African tonal language and a particular style of African drumming, and the similarities of Native American song to birdsong; but eventually we are led to the city in one odd sleight of hand:

Il canto degli uccelli nella voce degli indiani diviene ora il rumore delle nuove macchine. Istinto irrefrenabile dell’onomatopea.76

[The birdsong echoed by the voice of the Indians becomes now the noise of the new machines. The irrepressible instinct of onomatopoeia.]

We are then promptly provided with a brief clip of a mechanical noise of unspecified origin vaguely resembling the contour of the previously heard birdsong. But there is something decidedly awkward about this transition: whereas all examples thus far implied a rather conscious imitation of animal or human vocal sounds, we are now presented with a case of imitation involving a sound decidedly inanimate—the sounds produced by the rhythmical workings of a mechanical contraption, pointing us towards the technological apparatus of an urban environment. The documentary text also seems to be attributing imitative intent to the noises produced by a mechanism whose primary function is neither sonic nor musical; if the machine’s sounds are an example of onomatopoeia, who is performing the imitation? Unless we assume an odd lapse into animism—with onomatopoeia becoming a case of things talking—the turn implied here is from speaking to listening. Onomatopoeia, that is, has become not so much a way of

76 Berio and Eco, “Omaggio a Joyce,” 341.
producing new words, but a mode of listening in which patterns (even linguistic patterns) are discerned—by ear—into all surrounding sounds regardless of their source.

The double movement—towards a notion of onomatopoeia as listening, and towards the city—can be explained in terms of Berio and Eco’s particular literary interests, which at this time verged not only on Joyce, but also on an Italian thinker that was crucial to Joyce—Giambattista Vico. In his New Science (1733)—a text very dear to Joyce, but also to Eco, who would write at length about both Vico and Joyce in Opera Aperta (1962) a text famously inspired by his exchanges with composers like Berio—Vico famously staged onomatopoeia as the moment in which primitive humans answered thunderclap by imitating its sound, a moment in which “hearing” a natural phenomenon as linguistic communication became the condition for the ensuing imitative sound:

...eglino, spaventati ed attoniti dal grand’effetto di che non sapevano la cagione, alzarono gli occhi e avvertirono il cielo. E perché la natura della mente umana porta ch’ella attribuisca all’effetto la sua natura [...] e la natura loro era, in tale stato, di uomini tutti robuste forze di corpo che urlando, brontolando, spiegavano le loro violentissime passioni, si finsero il cielo un gran corpo animato, che per tal aspetto chiamarono Giove [...] che col fischio de’ fulmini e col fragore de’ tuoni volesse dir loro qualcosa...

[Frightened and astonished by the great event whose cause they did not know, they raised their eyes and noticed the sky. And since the nature of the human mind leads it to attribute its own ways to external events [...] and their nature was, at that time, that of men of great bodily strength who explained their violent emotions by way of screams and groans, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, whom for that reason they named Jove [...] who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of its thunder]

77 Giambattista Vico, Principi di scienza nuova d’intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni... corretta, chiarita, e notabilmente accresciuta, Paolo Rossi, ed. (Milan: Rizzoli, 1959), 157.
Within the network of Eco, Berio and their common attention to Joyce, this passage was especially well-thumbed. Joyce himself would take up this particular moment of the *New Science* in the beginning of *Finnegan’s Wake*—in which the thunder is “named” as the ludicrously onomatopoeic “bababadalgharaghtakaminarronkonbronntronnt-Uonnthunftrovarrhounawnskawntoohoohoordenenthurnuk,” and this same passage was in turn repeatedly evoked by Eco in *Opera Aperta*. What is important here, however, is that in Vico’s *New Science*, the process of onomatopoeia was a concept closely tied to the very origin of civilization, the passage from nature to culture. Onomatopoeia is bound with the origin of a space in which one is being talked at, addressed—a shared, public space created at the moment in which all sounds are heard as tending towards novel words: *phonè* spirited towards *logos*.

Onomatopoeia, then, is the means to a journey that leads all the way back to one of the most famous “places” of Western philosophy: the mythical site and time of the origin of language. Indeed, if *Thema* incarnates a place, a particular kind of site, it is precisely this primal scene of the origin language, a place that not only shares traits with Vico’s onomatopoeia, but also with other accounts of the origin of language, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s. We can, for instance, hear echoes of Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1781) behind Berio’s wish for a future listening praxis whose true purpose,

non sarebbe comunque di opporre o anche di mescolare due diversi sistemi espressivi, ma di creare invece un rapporto di continuità fra di loro, di rendere

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possibile il passaggio dall’uno all’altro senza darlo ad intendere, senza rendere palesi le differenze fra una condotta percettiva di tipo logico-semantic (quella che si adotta di fronte a un linguaggio parlato) e una condotta percettiva di tipo musicale.\textsuperscript{79}

[would not be to oppose or even to mix two different expressive systems, but to create a relation of continuity between them, to make the passage from one to the other unnoticeable, without exposing the difference between perceptual behavior of a logical-semantic type (whis is adopted with spoken language) and perceptual behavior of a musical type.]

Here then, is a mythical time and place where linguistic failure does not exist, but only an infinite potentiality for signification; a place where—to paraphrase with Rousseau—“there is no music but melody and no melody but the varied sounds of speech.”\textsuperscript{80} This is the place not of music, but, as musicologist Jacqueline Waeber puts it, of music, the excess and lack of semantics that separates modern day music from language, while fusing them both into the same projected shadow.\textsuperscript{81}

And yet the imagination of such a time and place—of such a primal language—is itself an historical product, one with strong geopolitical connotations. For Rousseau—writing in late eighteenth-century monarchical France, it was famously Italy, and Italian opera, which provided the modern cure to the longing for this primal “elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{82} For

\textsuperscript{79} Berio, “Poesia e musica,” 254-255.
\textsuperscript{82} Post-colonial critiques of Rousseau, such as Dainotto’s, notably do not dwell long on Rousseau’s embracing of the European South as a mourned site of origin—a characteristic that separated him from other French Enlightenmnet philosophers who held Italy in suspicion as a place adverse to literature and democracy. See Dainotto, \textit{Europe (In Theory)}, 101: “The south, which Montesquieu, Jacourt, and Voltaire had seen as the limit to Europe’s Republic of Letters, became for Rousseau, along with northern and calvinist Geneva, a positive utopia. Yet in Rousseau as in Montesquieu, the south
Berio, an Italian composer all-too-aware of his country’s high operatic cachet, but also of this cachet’s implicit relationship to Italy’s position as a southern (and chronic) late-comer to a constellation of Western governments who had a longer tradition of democracy, the retrieval of this music, this lost moment of potentiality, was a means to bringing a hierarchy of Western (and central European powers) back to a leveling ground in which no language had more claim to reason than others. To him, this musical “elsewhere” became experimental literature written in the English language. The symbolic role of English-language modernism is, paradoxically, one of the last traces of Milanese linguistic anxieties we can find in Thema. English—the language of the allied powers of the Second World War—enjoyed special political prestige in the first decade after the war as an international lingua franca that shadowed the formation of a state-wide common language in Italy. Italy’s state radio—which had been under the aegis of the filo-American Christian Democrat party since the early 1950s—was itself responsible for the inexorable spread of the English language, which was prolifically sent across the airwaves in the shape of anglophone pop music. Yet even within elite literary circles, English literature enjoyed much prestige: the literary magazine Il Verri, founded in Milan in 1956, privileged English-language poetry and literature above all other foreign literature. Eco, Berberian and Roberto Leydi passed many an evening together at Berio remained a distant fantasy of primitivism against which Europe, with nostalgia or with pride, could still theorize itself.”

84 To bring us back to more musicological pastures, one of Roberto Leydi’s earliest monographs after the war was a study of American protest songs: see Roberto Leydi, Ascolta, Mister Bilbo! : Canzoni di protesta del popolo Americano (Milan: Edizioni
and Berberian’s home both listening to new music and examining modernist literary works, often in foreign languages.\textsuperscript{85} We might gain much insight into the atmosphere that yielded \textit{Thema} if we stop to imagine precisely this fireside scene and the kind of listening experience it might have involved. Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses}—whose official Italian translation would be published by Mondadori only in 1960—would have been an arcane object, held out and likely read aloud by Berberian, the group’s only native English speaker. We might imagine her gentle American diction rebounding off the sitting room walls as Eco and Berio wrestled with Joyce’s forbidding constructions, enjoying the perceptual lilt between semantics and non-semantics of a language that was not, after all, their own but that, in its very unintelligibility, was a welcome, even familiar, aural experience. A Milanese evening, yet an evening revolving around the aural and linguistic encounter with an elsewhere, of an aural experience with no place. Phonation and audition, then, but phonation and audition yet unmoored from concrete language politics: a convivial return to the origins of language.

\textsuperscript{Avanti, 1954), and Leydi was deeply interested in jazz music in the early 50s, an interest that also reflected a widespread positive bias towards American cultural production. See Roberto Leydi in “Luciano Berio, Umberto Eco, Roberto Leydi rievocano lo Studio di Fonologia a quarant’anni dalla fondazione,” in \textit{Nuova Musica alla Radio}, 216-230: 221: “è in quella Milano che si manifestano, nello stesso crogiuolo nel quale esplodono tante e diverse vitalità culturali, quelle ‘passioni’ musicali che faranno presto della città una delle capitali musicali d’Europa. ‘Passioni’ che aggredivano tutta la musica—e tu certo Luciano ricordi le tante sere (e notti), a casa mia o a casa tua, ad ascoltare veramente di tutto. E accanto a noi c’erano persone più anziane, pensiamo soprattutto a Luigi Rognoni e Nando Ballo.”}
1.5. Conclusion

The resonance of Enlightenment theories of language in *Thema* and *Omaggio a Joyce* is hardly an isolated occurrence in mid-century Milanese modernism: in a retrospective essay on the efforts of 1950s and 60s literary avant-gardes in Italy, Umberto Eco located the Studio di Fonologia of Maderna and Berio within this intellectual climate: the Milan of the years of 1955-1960, which he termed an “illuminismo padano”—an Enlightenment of the Po valley. Eco’s reference to the Enlightenment was made in relation to a series of events and enterprises undertaken in Milan, all of which concerned literary research on language. Among them were the first translations of literary works by foreign avant-gardes (notably by Brecht and by Joyce), the foundation of the literary magazine *Il Verri* (named after Alessandro and Pietro Verri, both very active writers and thinkers in the Milanese Enlightenment of the 1760s), and the inauguration of the literary review *Il Politecnico* (also named after an earlier Milanese literary enterprise by Carlo Cattaneo).

The Studio di Fonologia is, strikingly, the only institution mentioned by Eco that is not a literary enterprise; indeed, it is the only activity concerned not with printed materials but with listening—a listening directed at the recorded and manipulated human

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86 The parallel between the Milanese Enlightenment and the Milanese 1950s is first discussed in Umberto Eco, “Il gruppo ’63 e l’illuminismo padano,” *Sugli specchi e altri saggi: Il segno, la rappresentazione, l’illusione, l’immagine* (Milan: Bompiani, 1985), 93-104. In this version of the essay, the Studio di Fonologia does not feature. It does feature in a later essay entitled “Gruppo ’63 quarant’anni dopo,” first delivered as the keynote lecture in Bologna on 8 May 2003, for a conference in celebration of the forty-year anniversary of Gruppo ’63’s foundation, and now published in the collection *Costruire il nemico e altri scritti occasionali* (Milan: Bompiani, 2011).
voice. It is likely that Eco’s point of reference for the Studio’s output was indeed *Thema*—the piece over which he had the most direct intellectual influence, and a piece that puts linguistic decoding and transcription at the heart of its poetics. The association—beyond Vico’s onomatopoeia—with a specifically Milanese Enlightenment is here particularly pointed. An erudite historian, Eco would have known that the Milanese Enlightenment had revolved around a magazine—*Il Caffè*—that boasted a peculiar narrative frame: it was presented by its editor as the transcribed conversations among the learned costumers of a bustling fictional coffee-shop in Milan. Transcription of oral exchanges, the aurality of a public venue: the linguistic scene of the Lombard Enlightenment shared similar coordinates to that of *Thema*. Of course, *Il Caffè* presented perfectly intelligible intellectual exchanges rather than the non-semantic complexities of Cathy Berberian’s manipulated voice, the clamour of the Ormond bar; yet the stress on a linguistic depiction of a public space roots them both in a shared concern with the nature of a common tongue, and it is this concern, perhaps, that lies behind Eco’s historiographical ordering.

Indeed, Eco’s enigmatic reference to the Milanese Enlightenment brings us all the way back—beyond the primal linguistic scene of *Thema*—to the politics of language within the State-owned media. If the Studio belongs to a Milanese Enlightenment, it does so most of all in virtue of its relation to the project of linguistic reform carried out by State broadcasting. Both enterprises share the construction of a fictional, ideal speaking subject. The act of transcription offered as the condition to *Il Caffè*’s life as a text is a politically charged narrative expedient: the construction of writing as the transcription of perfectly transparent common spoken language. It is not difficult to note the parallels
between such conceits and the complex negotiation of Italian as a spoken language in the national radio: the grafting of the “grain” of the mother tongue onto the ideal speaker’s voice, and the wry offering up—in *Ritratto*—of uninflected Italian as a Milanese “voice of mankind.”

It is not a coincidence, perhaps, that the chronology of the Studio’s work on the voice coincides with the most intense moments of encounter and confrontation with the economic and political parameters of RAI. If *Ritratto* was crafted the year prior to the studio’s opening as a pitch to RAI executives, it is also remarkable that the year after *Thema*’s completion, 1959, was also the year of Berio’s resignation as director; the Studio’s head engineer, Alfredo Lietti, resigned the following year. With the emergence of the new medium of television, the radio quickly became obsolete as a means of entertainment and linguistic education, and budget for the radiophonic avant-garde—and its quickly ageing state-of-the-arts technological apparatus—dwindled. Most of Berio and Maderna’s now famous elaborations on recorded speech were created over the following two years, as if to mark the overlap with, and incumbent expulsion from, the political and linguistic project of State-owned media.  

And so we are back to the discourse on the threshold—the state of simultaneous belonging and not belonging, of speech and insignificant vocality that haunted Prieberg’s loaded depiction of the Studio’s geopolitical location. Near the edge of the hyper-modern city hover by the silent ghosts of a rural past, so the story goes. And yet, what is perhaps

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most disturbing about Prieberg’s peasant, with his white clothes, dark skin, caged bird
and shawm, is that it, too, is already an aestheticized version of a concrete political
reality, the immigrant communities that lay huddled around the expanding city bounds.
The lyrical peasant is a ghost because he has been beautified out of political relevance.
He plays the old shawm because he no longer has need to speak. Years later, the writer
and activist Goffredo Fofi would report the Turinese workers’ perception of southern
immigrants through an image that looks like a grim—and perhaps more accurate—
version of Prieberg’s musical peasant:

Essi guardavano con una punta di disprezzo i loro cugini di campagna che, a
sentir loro, andavano in giro ‘con le radio appese al collo, le scarpe piene di buchi
e parlavano solo in dialetto’.  

[They looked with contempt upon their cousins from the countryside, whom, by
their account, walked around “with radios hanging around their neck and holes in
their shoes, and spoke only in dialect”]

Aside from the overt marker of poverty, it’s the sonic imagery—the imagery around the
voice, specifically—that has been most intensely modified; Prieberg’s peasant didn’t
speak, but instead blew into a shawm; Fofi’s immigrant is overloaded by broadcast
speech he—who “speaks only dialect”—doesn’t own, or, probably, understand. What is
melody in Prieberg becomes unintelligible speech in Fofi, the technology of the wind
instrument—channeling breath away from the voice and into melody—becomes the
technology of radio broadcasting—doubling the immigrant’s dialectal utterance as a
second, inscrutable voice issuing from the device hung on their neck. We might
understand the Studio’s work of the early fifties as bouncing conceptually between

precisely these two images, harnessing music now as consolation from, now as awed rediscovery of, the sinister gift of language.
Chapter 2

**Orality, Invisibility, and Laughter:**
*Traces of Milan in Bruno Maderna and Virginio Puecher’s *Hyperion* (1964)*

### 2.1 Introduction

Berio left the Studio di Fonologia in 1959, and soon after moved—after a series of temporary engagements—to the United States, where he would stay for more than ten years before his return to Italy in 1972. Maderna, however, worked at the Studio for more than three years after Berio’s departure, and then again on and off throughout the late 60s and until his untimely death in 1973. The compositions produced in those years notably carry aloft the torch of linguistic and vocal experimentation of Berio’s work in the late 50s—Maderna, too, ended up working with Berberian’s voice—and are driven by a mirthless energy that speaks to the dimming lights of that “Enlightenment of the Po Valley” to which the Studio’s original project had, after all, ardently belonged. We will return to these tape compositions repeatedly throughout this chapter (indeed, they will make up a good portion of its musical core), but for now it suffices to say that Maderna took them with him as he relinquished the Studio—and more specifically the project under whose auspices it had been founded—in 1962. It was these tapes, produced between 1960 and 1962, that struck Maderna as having the potential for an afterlife—for a graft, perhaps, onto another project. That project turned out to be the single most ambitious composition and collaboration undertaken by Maderna in his relatively brief
life: *Hyperion*, a one-act opera for orchestra, flute soloist, soprano and mimes created by Maderna and Milanese scenographer and stage-director Virginio Puecher. *Hyperion* would accompany Maderna throughout his life, not only because of repeated performances, but also because Maderna and Puecher saw to it that *Hyperion* was constantly made anew—through substantial new additions to both instrumental and vocal parts, new staging instructions and large grafts and cuts of text—every time it was given in performance, from its premiere in 1964 to its last performance in Maderna’s lifetime in 1972.

To say that *Hyperion* is “about” the last days of the Studio di Fonologia as Maderna and Berio had imagined them would be, of course, a vast overstatement. Yet, as I will argue, the opera is haunted by details that bespeak a flawed modernity—a modernity linguistic and political—whose symbolic epicenter was Milan. Mis-speaking, being misheard, and even being physically unable to speak, become with *Hyperion* part of a codified symptomatology that belongs to the northern Italian metropolis taken as a body politic. The theatre is key to this codification in more than one way: for one, the repetition and transmission of a play—let alone an opera—requires a surfeit of movable texts, of scripts literary and otherwise. For Maderna and Puecher, this becomes an occasion for radical executive decisions about the opera’s nature and future not only as text, but also as an utterance perched between oral and literary transmission. Secondly, the theatre allows—as it has always done—for powerful allegories of spatial inclusion and exclusion through its movable spaces, and the implied hierarchies at play among the bodies that inhabit them. Milan—although never explicitly referenced—is the allegorical referent for *Hyperion*’s stage directions, directions that are both visual in nature and,
frequently, sonorous, with language—intended as (erasable) writing, as a (faulty) network of signs, and as the (ever undeterminable) act of speaking—as its ultimate subject.

2.2 Unexpected voices

Unexpected sounds from behind a curtain, heard amid the hushed semi-darkness of a theatre auditorium: this is what audiences experienced at the opening moments of the premiere of *Hyperion* at the Venice Biennale on 6 September 1964. First came the clamor of male voices yelling at each other in Venetian dialect. Only then did the curtain part, in a slow, exaggeratedly haphazard way. The stage comes into view, but there is no

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1 The details of the dramaturgy of the 1964 premiere of *Hyperion* presented throughout the chapter result from an interpretive and comparative study of three main sources: 1) a live audio recording of the premiere with live commentary from an uncredited male speaker; 2) 7 one-sided typescript pages with a scene-by-scene synopsis of the opera bearing the following header: “N.B. La presente stesura dello schema narrative di Hyperion ripete fedelmente i dettagli dello spettacolo rappresentato a Venezia nel settembre 1963 [sic] in occasione del Festival Internazionale di musica contemporanea. Regia di Virgilio Puecher e Rosita Lupi;” 3) 13 numbered one-sided pages of detailed stage notes, in all likelihood penned by Puecher; this set provides detailed cues for tape materials, lights and on-stage movements starting from scene 3, which is when the music begins. Copies of all these materials were consulted at the Archivio Bruno Maderna in Bologna. The digital copy of the premiere recording is filed as “Tape A4,” while the written materials are found under section GIII of the archive. I here wish to thank Nicola Verzina—director of the Maderna archive in Bologna—for his help in the consultation of the materials. The originals of these documents are housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel. I wish to thank Angela Ida De Benedicts for her expertise, advice, and assistance on the materials in Basel. The materials are here quoted with permission from the Foundation. It should be noted that there are divergences between the filing method and groupings of the materials in the Maderna archive in Bologna and the Paul Sacher Foundation; given that my work here is not philological in nature, I have decided to base my discussion on the comparison between the recording of the premiere and the two sets of scene synopses and stage notes as I found them in Bologna.
one there, just an empty set. The backdrop is slightly crooked, hanging from the ceiling in mid-air without touching the stage floor. Only the obviously artificial rays of sunlight hitting the backdrop (it is 9pm, long after sunset) give any clue that the off-stage voices are part of the show. The voices grow louder and closer until a group of machinists arrives on stage; then comes the tearing screech of an off-stage mechanical saw. One of the men walks to the front of the stage. The audience begins to clap tentatively, then stops. Stage notes tell us that the man behaves as though he were alone: he whistles, taps, approaches the proscenium, recites in Venetian dialect a few classic excerpts, tries out the reverb of the room. Maybe he utters a few swearwords: shit, bollocks. If anyone answers from the audience, he replies “the phantoms of the opera.”

This technician eventually returns backstage, as the shouting and noises from the workers begin to die down. A musician in tails walks pompously on stage, accompanied

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3 Manuscript stage notes, 2. “Si comporta come se fosse solo: fischia, picchietta, si avvicina al proscenio, recita ‘in veneto’ qualche brano classico, prova la eco della sala: forse dice delle parolacce: merda, coglione. Se qualcuno dovesse rispondere dalla sala commenta: ‘i fantasmi dell’opera’.” This scene is slightly different in all three sources; grounding myself on the recording, I have found the manuscript stage notes to come closest to a description of what is going on stage; but it is difficult to know with certainty, because this part of the recording is overwhelmed with the sounds of the mechanical saw and the workers’ yells, and the speaker’s commentary gives no details as to the exact movements of the workers on stage. It is thus impossible to determine what the behavior of the machinist at the proscenium is; both the manuscript notes and typescript scene synopsis, however, mention the detail of an individual machinist approaching the proscenium, it is likely that this was an important detail of the performance.
by an assistant carrying four flute cases and a table, and another machinist with a large music stand and some sheets of music. The musician is none other than flautist Severino Gazzelloni, a rising TV personality in 1960s Italy, and probably recognizable to some of the audience; others would have known him as a distinguished classical performer, one of Maderna’s closest collaborators. Gazzelloni wanders around the stage, obviously puzzled as his helpers go about setting up; his flutes are placed on the table, the music stand is put up. The flautist’s behaviour is at times theatrically clumsy (stage notes instruct him to be “grotesque, even slightly ridiculous”). The audience giggles. He finally chooses a flute, approaches the music stand and readies himself to play; but before he makes a sound, odd metallic noises issuing from an invisible source—an excerpt from Maderna’s tape composition *Le Rire* (1962)—ring out from the empty space around him.

*Le Rire* began to play nearly six minutes into the 1964 premiere of *Hyperion*, and it is at this point that scholarly accounts of Maderna and Puecher’s *Hyperion* usually begin: only Maderna’s music—an extended flute piece, mixed into some forty minutes of electronic and orchestral music—is considered part of the text. This concentration on the musical score is, in the case of *Hyperion*, a consequence of the piece’s extreme fragmentation, which has prompted scholars to establish a common textual basis for analysis. The creators left no libretto or complete published score. Every performance

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4 *Ibid.*: “Posa la sedia, si china per prendere l’astuccio di uno strumento. Lo posa in grembo. Apre un piccolo leggio, si china per prendere della musica, urta il leggio che cade. Rialza il leggio, gli cade la musica. Si alza per raccoglierla. Cade la sedia. È indeciso se raccogliere prima la musica o la sedia. Decide per la musica. Si mette carponi, non riesce a trovare i numeri corrispondenti, mescola i fogli di musica come grandi carte pescandole dal ventaglio da lui davanti. Il tutto è un po’ grottesco, leggermente ridicolo.”

5 Perhaps the most obvious symptom of scholarly anxiety about fixing the text of *Hyperion* can be detected in writing about thematic unity in the opera’s text across its
(there were five between 1964 and 1977) came with substantial additions and alterations; each is a discrete textual variant. But those noises, the para-textual or extra-textual noises that were scripted via stage directions into the 1964 performance, are as much a meaningful part of the work as Maderna’s musical compositions, and indeed both provide a window into the ideological and cultural contexts that gave rise to Maderna’s music, and enrich our sense of its significance.

This chapter focuses on Hyperion’s first performance, which I will refer to as Hyperion ’64. My description of the opening moments of the work is archival: it is only by digging through unpublished materials that one can recuperate this otherwise hidden seam of sonic traces. Such traces include, for example, the unofficial tape recording of the premiere, and Puecher’s unpublished scene synopses. The dearth of published materials concerning Hyperion’s performances was the direct result of its creators’ intention: to preserve it from the fixity of printed text, to secure for it an oral tradition, unhinged from the external visual support of text and inseparable from the singularity of utterance, the unrepeatable event. As I will be arguing, it is far from coincidental that the first moments of the opera are dominated by a cleaving of sound from sight, gesturing towards an aural rather than visual mode of engagement. Even more striking is how the vocal altercation, construction noises and audience chuckles work to turn our ear away various versions. Different perspectives on the thematic unity are provided by Nicola Verzina, Bruno Maderna: Étude historique critique (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003), esp. 157-180, and Gianmario Borio and Veniero Rizzardi, “L’Unité musicale de Hyperion,” in Geneviève Mathon, Laurent Feneyrou and Giordano Ferrari, À Bruno Maderna, vol. 1 (Paris: Basalte Éditeur, 2007), 123-161. Much work has been also devoted to identifying the work’s unifying common poetic and literary traits. A recent exhaustive account of the general poetic and dramaturgical traits is in Giordano Ferrari, “Hyperion: les chemins du poète,” in À Bruno Maderna, vol. 1: 89-123. No account of the dramaturgical details of a specific performance of Hyperion has been produced to date.
from the stage—the site of scripted performance—and towards the irreverently resonant sounds off-stage.

The occlusion of sight and insistence on hearing are not immediately traceable to the literary source of *Hyperion ’64*, Hölderlin’s homonymous novel, written between 1797 and 1799. We may, however, begin to make sense of the connection between Hölderlin and Maderna, and between both of these and Puecher’s unorthodox dramaturgy, by considering the novel’s underlying theme: the difficulty of direct oral communication. This is an aspect that Maderna and Puecher’s insistence on the secret sonorities of the theatre’s invisible spaces brings into play. Hölderlin’s hero is a youth who travels through Greece in search of the ancient roots of the European Enlightenment, particularly its ideal of transparent human communion—a creed progressively undermined by warmongering, indifference, and, ultimately, complete abandonment by everyone the youth knows, including his elegiac lover, Diotima. Maderna, for his part, transfigures Hölderlin’s sorrows into a theatrical concert piece that takes as its theme the inability to speak and the impossibility of making oneself understood. The protagonist is an unnamed flautist—an implicit musical version of Hyperion—who plays his instrument as a substitute for speaking or singing. The plot unfolds in a single act, over the course of slightly less than an hour. It comprises seven scenes of variable length (the first two

6 The ideal of linguistic transparency and human communion as unfulfilled potentialities of Enlightenment thought is a recurring aspect of Jürgen Habermas’ concept of the “ideal speech situation,” a communication mode based on simple, effective rules and the basis for genuine democratic governance. This is an idea examined in several texts, but its most concise statement is found in Jürgen Habermas, “Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification,” in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhart and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 86-88.
scenes take up roughly six minutes, the last one nearly fifteen) and a recurring narrative structure: the flautist repeatedly attempts (largely in vain) to engage with the audience, the orchestra, and even with an enormous mechanical contraption operated by robotic mimes. As his attempts grown in number, the violence of the reaction to his entreaties grows more violent. Disheartened at last, he summons up a ghostly woman—possibly a remote reference to the character of Diotima—who sings an extended, darkly forlorn soprano aria, accompanied by the orchestra, before disappearing, leaving the flautist to exit the stage as he plays a muted final solo.

It has been convincingly argued that the scattered, fragmentary form of Hölderlin’s novel appealed to the expressionist strain of Maderna’s poetics; yet it is specifically the tension between the literary and oral medium that haunts the structure of both Hölderlin’s novel and Maderna’s Hyperion ’64. Hölderlin wrote amid the rise of the German publishing industry, and deliberately subverted that industry by scattering manuscript fragments among multiple publications, so as to lend his writing something of the untraceability and ephemerality of vocal confessions. The same anxiety about putting things into plain words plagues the novel’s protagonist, a lyrical soul whose passionate impulses are not verbalized but rather traced with seismographic accuracy by his autonomous writing hand, and then dispatched as missives to a distant friend. Much as Hölderlin’s Hyperion articulates his pain only through writing, Maderna and Puecher’s flautist is plagued by the impossibility of immediate verbal expression. Both characters, then, mirrored their authors in a desire to transform ordinary means of expression into an

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original orality, into the linguistic vanishing point of the speaking mouth. It is this same ambition that haunts the strange publishing history of Hölderlin’s *Hyperion* and that reverberates through Maderna and Puecher’s sparse notation of their opera.

The lack of a comprehensive text for *Hyperion ’64* (and for any of its subsequent variants) is, of course, commonplace in the context of the 1960s’ international avant-garde. Indeed, *Hyperion* has often been associated with Umberto Eco’s concept of the open work: as a piece whose lack of textual fixity allows for constant reinterpretation and an interaction between producer and consumer. Yet what makes *Hyperion* singular is the extent to which concerns about orality are reflected not only in the authors’ decisions regarding its mode of circulation as a text, but also in the dramaturgical use of spoken language as a way both of animating the theatrical space and of framing Maderna’s composed score. Because of this aspect, *Hyperion ’64* presents us with a strange mapping of mid-century ideologies of linguistic communication in the era of electrified media. In writings such as Levi-Strauss’s morphological analysis of myth-telling in *La Pensée sauvage* (1962), or McLuhan’s celebration of the return to the “resonant oral word” in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), orality came to be considered as a positive and pervasive aesthetic, a political and even philosophical marker of the times. As has been widely pointed out since, the idealization of “orality”—and of the act of hearkening to speech—is loaded with unsavory binaries, theological constructs, and unacknowledged reliance on acts of “entextualization” (recording, production, transcription) that show the return to a

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8 Umberto Eco, who was a friend of Maderna, began *Opera Aperta* (1962) with a list of post-war composers including Luciano Berio, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Henri Pousseur, who introduced aspects of mobility, non-fixity and improvisation in their music. See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cicognini (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. 3-13.
pre-literary state to be a politically conservative ideal.\(^9\) Such unease about the ideological implications of orality are not, however, only something to be spelled in hindsight. They are already to be found in the cultural productions of sites—such as the northern Italy of the early 1960s—that lay at the near periphery of this ideology’s breeding ground. My argument here is that *Hyperion ’64* not only inhabits, but actively represents, in theatrical form, this conceptual periphery and the peculiar sensorial history that pertains to it.

How can we hear Hyperion’s opening against this historical and ideological canvas? By placing it against ideology, the politics of aurality and orality in Italy in the 1960s, the insights as well as the intellectual soft spots of its theorists. Yet also by placing that ideology, and the piece itself, in a historical context. And finally, by asking questions about our own received music-theoretical and music-philosophical thinking about voice and sound, and what happens at the borders where words become tones, or music becomes noise, or instrumental sound morphs into the synthetic.

### 2.3 Our Old Friend, the Acousmatic

By having the workers’ noises and voices come from beyond an abandoned stage, Puecher turned the site of spectacle into an opaque partition: the voices clamoring behind

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become “acousmatic.” The idea of acousmaticity entered musicological discourse thanks to the father of musique concrète, Pierre Schaeffer, who conceived it as a heightened mode of listening induced by sounds whose sources are not only invisible but also impossible to locate, sometimes even unimaginably so. Schaeffer did not conceive of the acousmatic as a property of sound, but rather as a consequence of phenomenological engagement with it. The most popular contemporary account of the acousmatic is Michel Chion’s. Chion sheds the phenomenological slant of Schaeffer’s formulation and discusses the acousmatic property of voices, and particularly cinematic voices, whose visual source is hidden and untraceable within the diegetic space. He or she who speaks off-screen and outside of the diegesis is, in Chion’s terms, an acousmêtre, an omnipresent entity whose powers are unknowable and potentially boundless. In Chion’s account, it is paradigmatic that the unseen voice has superior authority—invisible voices, after all, are aligned in religion and myth with the divine.

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11 The tendency to bypass the problem of language is not specific to Chion, and would require a lengthier and broader reflection. Schaeffer himself, in his long line of thought about the phenomenology of electronically reproduced sound, had a strange relationship to the question of language. This is something that is indirectly pointed out in Brian Kane’s recent critique of Schaeffer in “L’Objet Sonore Maintenant: Pierre Schaeffer, sound objects and the phenomenological reduction,” *Organised Sound*, 12/1 (April 2007), 15-24. Kane critiques Schaeffer for assuming an essential, ahistorical core to sound to be retrieved via an *epoché* (phenomenological reduction). This aspect is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the question of the phenomenological reduction of speech. In Schaeffer’s complex account of the modes of listening—which are meant to lead progressively to a full reduction of the sound object to its essential qualities—language plays a peripheral role. It is unclear how, for example, speech would lose its semantic properties, or any broader linguistic property, and what remains once speech has been semiotically stripped down—whether a voice or something even further removed from the meaningful utterance.
Chion’s concept of the acousmètre is in fact a recognizable historical product of standard mid-century conceits about orality and its overwhelming socio-political potentialities. The most obvious symptom of this is a linguistic quality: Chion’s acousmêtres are always perfectly intelligible, devoid of regional dialect: a triumph of orthophony. But *Hyperion*’s acousmêtres are not like Chion’s “universal” ideal: they are in dialect, and semantically unintelligible. Their invisibility does not—as it might in a film—make their provenience unimaginable: they are bound to their audience by the common space of the theatre, in which the audience can hear that they are somewhere nearby. They must draw their semiotic foreignness, and with this, in theory, a potential power, from an altogether more complex dynamic of hearing and speaking. The partition that renders their voice acousmatic is not so much a physical one, but a political one: their place in the spatial economy of theatre is set apart from the stage at the time and place of the evening’s performance. As Giorgio Agamben would put it, within the political microcosmos of the theatre, they are included by dint of their exclusion from the evening’s performance; their job is to be invisible while the show is ongoing. Yet what interests me here is the sensorial correlation of such a distribution of space, what Jacques Rancière terms “the partition of the sensible,” the way politics is articulated as mapping out what we take in as meaningful sensorial stimuli, that is, as aesthetics: “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to

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12 I use here this rather obscure term because it evokes the political associations of elocution manuals and speech-writing machines in relation to emerging technologies of sound recording and the study of oral cultures. This is partly explored by Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), chap. 5 (‘The Social Genesis of Sound Fidelity’), 215-286.
see and the talent to peak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. It is not just that the workers should not be on stage at the opening of a theatre performance. Rather, the political division of space is such that even when they are, their voices, their bodies, their actions make no sense to the attending audience, they are suspected to be the result of a mistake, a malfunction, and heard (and seen) as a disturbance.

It is the semiotics of this mapping of space that renders the workers’ voices acousmatic. They are perceived—even when they become visible on stage—across an irreducible political partition manifested at the level of the senses, and particularly at the level of listening. The workers’ non-belonging to the stage is already manifested in the characteristics of their speech: their overlapping voices and non-theatrical diction make the content of their speech often indecipherable, the thick Venetian dialect they use would not necessarily have been intelligible to the nationwide audience of a Biennale performance, and they are heard, in the beginning, from the muffled acoustics of the off-stage. But these same characteristics also marks them as bodies whose language is, in this context, not to be minded as meaningful. Maderna and Puecher emphasize the social and political gap between the backstage voices and the listening audience not only spatially, but on a temporal level. The artificial afternoon light coming in from the stage windows

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13 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London & New York: Continuum Press, 2004), 13. The reference to Giorgio Agamben is drawn from his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), esp. 11-12. The “inclusive exclusion” is key to the definition of exception as that which belongs to the political order by virtue of being banned from it. It is important to note that for Agamben, the dynamic of exclusion and inclusion is articulated through the voice, which may be represented as *phoné* (non-semantic, bare life) or *logos* (human language) within the state according to political function and power.
suggests the workers’ voices and bodies are broadcast from a temporal dimension different from that of the performance. Within five minutes of the beginning of the show, the stage is transformed into a complex mediatic node through which voices (and, to a lesser extent, images) from socially, geographically, and temporally discrete dimensions are captured and bound together into the same inscrutable common space.

The workers’ voices from backstage, as well as the laughter elicited by the flautist’s clumsy movements are far from an isolated opening gesture: they function to set up a particular kind of theatrical sound matter. Both sounds will subsequently be echoed in the distorted phonemes and laughter of Dimensioni II, Maderna’s tape piece from 1960 that is re-used in the central section of Hyperion ‘64. The workers’ voices simultaneously establish the impairment of those who hear them—who cannot parse them into semantics units—and the undecipherable linguistic abilities of their sources. One of the chief aural corollaries of the stage’s mediatic quality, and a crucial aspect of the use of theatrical space in Hyperion ‘64, is in fact a particular mode of attending to speech in which semantics are, at least in part, tuned out in favour of sheer sonourousness. Yet this elimination of sense is not—as we shall see—the means towards an abstraction of language into a musical vocality, a case of logos being chased out of the house by melos. The trappings of signifying language are never quite shed in Hyperion ‘64—the opera seems to set up a complex scenario in which semantics may no longer be a worthwhile sacrifice at the altar of the musical voice.

The slide from symbolic language to sound is one of the aspects implicit in acousmatic listening, but until now unexplored (or at least since Schaeffer’s time). Taking acousmatic listening as a sort of phenomenological reduction through hearing,
Schaeffer framed acousmatic sounds as those that have lost semiotic anchoring to their source. Yet what is the consequence of applying such a reduction to speech rather than to the human voice at large? What mode of listening is engaged when semantic content is misunderstood, misheard, or even undetected, as are the workers’ voices at the opening of Hyperion ‘64? To answer that, we need to delve into a previously unexplored linguistic aspect of acousmatic listening, one that concerns the roots of the acousmatic in 1960s ideologies of orality and the media in the fraught northern Italian context of Hyperion ‘64’s production. This particular take on the acousmatic, of the relation of sound, sight, and sense—as something related to a particular experience of Italian orality at large—is the vantage point through which we can map the roots of Hyperion ‘64 in a particular urban, social, and linguistic enclave, the enclave in which its two authors imagined and produced many of its sounds: the city of Milan.

2.4 Milan in a Fog

It may seem strange to ground a theater piece that opens with Venetian dialect, and features music by a Venetian composer (Maderna), in Milan. However, a closer look at the dramaturgical aspects of Hyperion ‘64’s scene reveals many traces of the Milanese experiences of Maderna and Puecher at this time. For one, the insistence on the artifice of theater is redolent of Puecher’s Brechtian training at Giorgio Strehler’s Piccolo Teatro, founded in 1946 in Milan.\(^\text{14}\) Puecher worked as an assistant director for Strehler, and

\(^{14}\) For overviews of Milanese theatrical life in the 1960s see Irene Piazzoni, “Lo spettacolo a Milano negli anni sessanta,” in Carlo G. Lacaita and Maurizio Punzo, eds.,
Maderna was often hired by the Piccolo as music director and conductor: indeed one of his first meetings with Puecher might have been when they collaborated over the Italian premiere of Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* in 1950.\(^\text{15}\) The Brechtian *Verfremdung* is here worked by breaking the illusion of “liveness,” exposing the stage as a technological—and specifically radiophonic—medium.\(^\text{16}\) The reference to radiophony also speaks to a Milanese background: Maderna himself spearheaded, along with Luciano Berio, a radio-based avant-garde by co-founding, in 1955, the Studio di Fonologia, Italy’s first electronic music studio at the RAI studios in Milan’s Corso Sempione. The Studio’s initial project, as we shall see, had much to do with recording, analyzing, and making music from speech fragments. It is from Maderna and Berio’s Studio that the electronic tape materials in *Hyperion ’64* (nearly a third of its duration) were drawn. Yet these circumstantial ties between Milan, Maderna and Puecher are merely the surface of a larger set of connections between the city and *Hyperion ’64*’s dramaturgy. There is a close relation between the scenic space and a particular kind of perception of Milan in the late 50s—years of steep economic and industrial development—as a transitional, unintelligible space in its visual, sonic, and linguistic aspects.

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\(^{15}\) Puecher cut his teeth as a director of contemporary opera on La Scala’s two stages (the main stage and the Piccola Scala) with operas like Ferruccio Busoni’s *Turandot* (La Scala, 1960), Guido Turchi’s *Il soldato Svejk* (La Scala, 1960), Luciano Berio’s *Passaggio* (Piccola Scala, 1963), Giacomo Manzoni’s *Atomtod* (La Scala, 1965). For a detailed chronicle of Puecher’s work as an opera director, see Virginio Puecher, “Diario di un’esperienza,” *Sipario*, 19/224 (December 1964), 20-21, 44-46.

\(^{16}\) My use of the words “mediatic” and “liveness” are here borrowed from Philip Auslander’s *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999, second edition: 2002).
We can connect this Milanese substrate to *Hyperion ’64* at the very moment the flautist starts to try to play his instrument, when he is first interrupted by metallic sounds at the end of scene 1. The source of those sounds is invisible, and commands immediate silence from the flautist; but besides having no visible source, the sounds are difficult to trace to any recognizable human sonic event. They are, in fact, synthesized pitches: percussive, rich in metallic overtones, unfolding slowly like an arrhythmic death knell, and with that they seem to approach the timbre of bells. In *Hyperion ’64*, the ghostly bell-peals are coordinated with the descent of steel-colored partitions that gradually render the stage invisible to the flautist, who can only look on helplessly as he is being dispossessed of his own dwelling ground. The sounds are like an incarnation of steel blinders, and it is the audio-visual dyad that blocks the protagonist’s sight of the space. *Sound* – the death knell – is thus implicated in the occlusion of *sight*.

These bell-like sounds are in fact mapped from a specific external source, and some audience members might have recognized them as a striking evocation of the music that accompanies the opening credits of one of the most iconic films made about Milan in the early 1960s, Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La notte*, first shown in 1961. Although the credits music in *La notte* is not identical to that in Maderna’s *Le Rire*, it was written by the Milanese composer Giorgio Gaslini, an active participant at the Studio di Fonologia. What is more, the similarity in timbre suggests a common technical provenience in the Studio’s system of nine oscillators.\(^\text{17}\) In Antonioni, the music accompanies a panoramic

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\(^{17}\) The use of electronic music for the opening credits of *La Notte* is mentioned by Maurizio Corbella in *Musica elettroacustica e cinema in Italia negli anni Sessanta* (Ph.D. dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 2008/9), 141. Corbella lists the electronic
view of Milan—the film is in black and white—taken from a glass elevator soaring above the city. Although the city is ostensibly displayed below the camera on the elevator, in full daylight, the music signals the view as something unfamiliar and disquieting. We see none of Milan’s landmarks—the Duomo, the Castello Sforzesco, Parco Sempione—but instead a vast industrial complex under construction; shot from its urban periphery, the great city as we know it is no more visible than any space engulfed in darkness. As the elevator rises inexorably, the quietly ominous music continues; on the screen appears the movie’s title, as if to label the state of mind evoked by the scene—“La notte” (The Night).

Thus both scenes, from La notte and Hyperion ’64, evoke the sense of a space—a stage, a city—that has become unavailable to the sight of its inhabitants. And this concealment of once-visible space allegorizes one of modernism’s most well-documented perceptual defense mechanisms: the way in which urban sensorial overload forces the individual to block or occlude the senses to cope with being assaulting by hectic sights and nerve-wracking sounds. This is a recurring trope in accounts of cities in the throes of industrialization, but is particularly pointed in the case of Milan in this precise period. Unlike the great cities to the north, Paris or London or Berlin, Milan was a latecomer, overtaken by an unprecedented, vertiginous urbanization between 1958 and 1963. For John Foot, echoing a widespread critical consensus among historians, the Milanese economic miracle represents “one of the most intense and concentrated periods of

excerpt in La Notte as one among others used in 1960s’ Italian films to signify a state of physical or psychological “transition.”
economic development the world has ever seen.”

Indeed, the favorable commercial treaty granted Italy by the Marshall Plan brought much profit to Milan in the late 50s. Its automotive and appliance industries became internationally competitive thanks to the cheap labor that poured in from rural areas of the peninsula, giving rise to what Paul Ginsborg terms an “anthropological shuffling of the country’s population unprecedented in its history.” As incoming migrants demanded new housing, and burgeoning industries required new images of their status, the physiognomy of the city was transformed: skyscrapers like the Pirelli or Velasca towers appeared, while the periphery sprawled into the countryside. Meanwhile, television sets became a standard household asset. In other words, the specific, dark sense of the public space displayed by La notte and Hyperion ’64 has little to do with the frenzied crowd of Benjamin’s Paris, or the electrified contraption that is Fritz Lang’s Berlin metropolis. No, the audio-visual allegory is specific to mid-century Milan, an urban space apprehended through a distorting interface: a city shot through its burgeoning, ugly periphery—a stage blocked off by partitions.

There is another domain in which Milan the city and Hyperion 64 merged, and this domain involves the symbolic significance of Milan’s prevailing meteorological conditions: its fog—the byproduct of the Po valley’s damp and cold. For Italians, the Milanese damp fog is legendary; its cinematic and literary history is particularly rich.

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18 John Foot, Milan since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2001), 19.
20 See John Foot, Milan since the Miracle, 80: “It would be interesting to delve deeper into the psyche of a city whose identity seems to be defined, physically, by not being able to see it—by its very meteorological invisibility.”
between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. In 1956, the famous Neapolitan actor Totò starred in a hugely successful comedy about two elderly, near illiterate small southern landowners who travel to Milan. In preparation for the great trip north, Antonio ("Totò") Caponi (played by Totò) and his brother Peppino consult one of their friends, Mezzacapa, who used to live in the big city. Misunderstandings arise when it comes to the topic of Milan’s fog:

Mezzacapa: And fog …! Ah fog, lots of fog!
Totò: Ah, see, that scares me! I can deal with anything, but not the fog!
M: When there’s fog in Milan, you can’t see a thing.
T: Oh dear! Who sees it then? [...] 
M: No-one can see it.
T: But then if the Milanese, in Milan, can see nothing when there’s fog, how can they see that the fog is there?
M: No, you don’t get it, it’s not something you can touch!
T: You can’t touch it… You can’t touch it!
Peppino: […] I’ll be sure not to touch it!^{21}

Poised between faltering sense and natural or man-made boundary, for a southerner traveling to the northern metropolis, the fog generates a particular kind of unease. Unlike other aspects of the northern weather (wind, snow, the cold), the fog frightens Totò. His unease is signified by the punning on the verb “can” in the sentence “you can’t touch it,” which Peppino then inevitably takes as a warning, an interdiction. Not merely a meteorological phenomenon, the Milanese fog becomes the incarnation of the doubt of

^{21}“Mezzacapa: Acqua, vento... e nebbia! Eh... nebbia, nebbia!/Totò: Ah, questo m'impressiona! Tutto, ma la nebbia.../M: A Milano, quando c'è la nebbia non si vede./ T: Perbacco... e chi la vede? [...] M: Nessuno./T: Ma, dico, se i milanesi, a Milano, quando c'è la nebbia, non vedono, come si fa a vedere che c'è la nebbia a Milano?/M: No, ma per carità, ma quella non è una cosa che si può toccare./T: Non si tocca... non si tocca./Peppino: [...] Io non la tocco, per carità.”
those who behold the city at the midcentury: a doubt about the political distribution of space.

This doubt, put in ideological terms, is a doubt about the significance and distribution of Milan’s new and old urban spaces. Fog per se of course can have a near-mythical dimension as the intangible manifestation of the furious pace and unintelligible production processes of the industrialized capital. Yet the symbolism of Milanese fog of the late 50s and early 60s corresponds to a specific social and cultural aspect of the city that pervade the poetics of Hyperion ’64: the manner in which the phenomenon of mass urbanization occurred simultaneously with the ascent and development of mass media.

Unlike most other European and North American metropolises, which saw the emergence of these media well after an earlier industrial urbanization of public space, in Milan the two processes developed almost nearly at the same time. I say “nearly” because Milan’s

22 Milan, of course, is not the first city to be enshrouded by fog. While there is no monograph on the literary and cinematic significance of fog across different urban and historical spheres, a few recent essays and anthologies offer stimulating starting points. Although only in small part about the meteorological phenomenon, Franco Moretti’s recent essay “Fog,” New Left Review 81 (May-June 2013), 59-92 talks about romantic images of “veiling” as connected to the rise of capitalist ideology in the mid-nineteenth century. Also important is the anthology curated by Umberto Eco and Remo Ceserani, Nebbia (Turin: Einaudi Editore, 2009). The anthology catalogues literary references to fog according to historical period, theme and location; the section entitled “Milan, Turin and the Po Valley,” 133-185, is especially relevant to my chapter. On the topic of the relationship between opera and fog, Gundula Kreuzer has recently taken the fog as the very figure of the poetic transition from the operatic stage into the urban surroundings, and from the musical “work” into concrete cultural event. See Gundula Kreutzer, “Wagner-Dampf: Steam in Der Ring des Nibelungen and Operatic Production” Opera Quarterly 27/2-3, (Spring-Summer 201), 179-218: 181.

23 John Foot, Milan Since the Miracle, 106: “television made and re-invented the city, and its spread coincided not with suburbanization—as in the US or the UK, but with urbanization and industrialization.” Foot is in turn referencing David Forgacs, “Spettacolo: teatro e cinema” in Nicola Tranflaglia and Pier Giorgio Zunino, eds., Guida all’Italia contemporanea, 1861-1997, Vol. 4 (Milan: Garzanti, 1998), 203-94.
primacy as a site of mass media had already begun to fade during the early 60s: the city’s role as the fulcrum of Italian television had played out in the mid-1950s, when broadcasting began; by the late 50s, Roman studios took over more and more aspects of production. At the height of its post-war prosperity, the city was no longer the national center of televisual transmission.\(^\text{24}\)

In its televisual heyday, however, Milan was a city whose own new visual media befogged and occluded its actual appearance. Views of the city’s great bustle never made it on screen. Instead, the city was represented by a constellation of variously potent symbols of wellbeing. The advertising of luxury commodities, quiz shows and the magically accessible prizes they promised: both represented, to those who watched television outside Milan, the Milanese way of life, without any need for an establishing shot of the city itself. Architectural physiognomy was not Milan’s dominant televisual asset. In the imagery of the Milanese miracle, architecture was invisible, replaced by neon signs, electric signifiers of the pleasure-seeking middle class whose bright lights could be as blinding as the vapors of the Po valley. The invisibility of the city of Milan during the Miracle—the feeling associated with the Miracle’s fog—was the consequence of the ideology of its televisual representation, which veiled the cityscape in favor of a score of commercial simulacra.

The regressive and ideological aspects of such an occluded urban reality did not escape the imaginations of an intellectual elite: writers and artists who, having come of age in the anti-fascist post-war, under the influence of the Partito Comunista Italiano,

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\(^{24}\) The brief but intense overlap of RAI’s major headquarters and Milan is the specific subject of Ada Ferrari’s *Milano e la RAI: un incontro mancato?: luci e ombre di una capitale di transizione: 1945-1977* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2002).
viewed with suspicion the launch of their city as a capitalist metropolis, and doubted their own role within a reconfigured society. For these intellectuals, fog—or the particular sense of phenomenological incapacity that fog represents—clung stubbornly to the exploited working class, which artists idealistically viewed as the mirror image of their own sense of non-belonging in the face of the rising Milanese middle-class. For example, Luchino Visconti’s migrant workers in *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) walk around the industrial suburb of Lambrate enshrouded in a fog that seems to emanate directly from a Marxist base-structure, the invisible political ground designed around them and against them. In midcentury imagery of Milan, fog takes on this role of hostile political demarcation as it mixes with the steam of engines that greets migrants stepping off the train on arriving in Milan; it gives one “the feeling of being in another country, or even another planet.”

2.5 The Occluded Voice

But fog can also be an acoustic phenomenon, and it is here that the byways branch from the political and cinematic allegories about Milanese fog and blindness, back to *Hyperion* ’64 and its ideological soundings. Contemporary accounts suggest that the thick curtain of fog that hid the ferment of Milan’s miracle had an especially sinister effect on the relation of bodies and voices, effects that bring us back to the question of acousmatic speech. One of the most powerful literary accounts comes from Luciano Bianciardi, an activist and reluctant member of Milan’s literary intelligentsia. Outraged by the deaths

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caused by the working conditions of miners near his home, Bianciardi left his hometown in 1953 in order to plant a bomb at the headquarters of the chemical enterprise Montecatini in Milan, and was instead absorbed within the city’s literary bustle. For the city’s fog he would reserve his most bitter venom in his 1962 autobiographical novel, *La vita agra*:

> They call it fog, they cherish it. They show it to you, they glory in it being a local product. And it is a local product. Only it is not fog. It is fuming rage, a flatulence of men, of chimneys; it is sweat, it is the smell of feet, the dust raised by the clicking heels of secretaries, whores, clerks, graphic designers, PRs, the tapping of typewriters; it is the bad breath of rotted teeth, stomach ulcers, blocked intestines, constipated sphincters, it is the smell of deodorant on armpits, of vacant fannies and unused cocks.26

Bianciardi’s fog functions as the insipid glue that binds together an alienated crowd; it produces, and is in turn produced by, bodies that have undergone mutilation. In this fog, everybody exists from the waist down, and the graphic reference to genital and anal orifices serves to emphasize the absence of the ear and eye, the bodily openings associated with the senses that attend to dialogue, to linguistic exchange. Although we are faced with overwhelming olfactory, sonic, and physiological detail about these moving bodies, we are missing the one sound that would console us in the absence of faces, heads, arms and torsos: that of human voices. The fog triggers the disquieting

sense of acousmatic hearing: we expect to apprehend the animated human body by its most distinctive sound—the voice—but hear only clicks and taps. Yet in Bianchiardi’s imagination, the fog is also the product of the body’s seemingly lost ability to express itself vocally; it is, quite literally, made of the air that passes by these bodies, by mouths that are no more able to speak than other orifices. The puffs of breath that emanate from Bianchiardi’s Milanese crowd are, in the end, the pallid specters of muted speech.

Of course, the idea that the citizenry is at its most defeated when denied a “voice” is a familiar cliché in political discourse. But there is much more at stake in this grotesque vision, much more than simply imposed muteness. The cleaving of voice and body—operated either through the curtaining off of the speaking body, or the inability for a listener to recognize speech or even voice, is indeed the aural equivalent of the fog, an acousmaticity that is semiotic and, crucially, linguistic. For example, Totò’s discussion of the fog, comic as it is meant to be, ends in linguistic confusion: assured by his friend that he will be able to track down a certain local showgirl thanks to the neon signs all over town, he tells Peppino “Did you hear that? In Milan, when there is fog, they put up signs everywhere.” Again, the joke signals a deeper truth about southern perceptions of the city: Totò and Peppino are barely literate; they are awed by the image of a city silently pervaded by the written letter, inaccessible to speech. In 1955—the year in which this parody of Southern migration was released—a comedy about Italian linguistic difference hinged on the stereotypical difference between literate and oral culture. Yet over the ensuing five years, the division of north and south, along the dichotomy of urban and rural (even literate and oral) would shatter into a forest of rivalling oral cultures, linguistic ciphers of the chaotic demographics caused by Milan’s economic miracle. The
sense of linguistic alienation would grow and spread into the nooks and crannies of the building sites of the expanding city. In 1961, the sounds of a construction site for the underground train system—which would open in 1964, year of Hyperion’s premiere—would be heard as an acousmatic, dialectal tower of Babel:

From the excavations and tunnels of the Metropolitana rose up the babble of all the dialects of Italy: barbe alpine, massacani, garzoni siciliani.27

This is precisely the experience that is recalled and repeated in the opening moments of Hyperion ’64, those confused layers of voices yelling in Venetian dialect. From the depths of a “city’s” (the stage’s) new underground sinews, hidden from sight, comes speech misheard as mere mouthed sound: the linguistic sound matter of the labor force behind a partitioning of public space. But this high-powered critical spotlight can also be turned on the audience sitting in the theatre. What the opening of Hyperion ’64 tells the spectator is that at the moment in which the nation’s multitudinous dialectal idioms were folded into the northern city, the doubt concerning the provenience and meaning of speech became something of an existential condition. The bourgeois ear that tuned out dialect as insignificant sound would grow estranged from its own voice. In La notte, one character speaks her true feelings only once, through a tape recording of her voice that she plays back to her interlocutor; moments later the lead character, a writer who is considering selling his talents to an industry magnate, listens to his estranged wife read him a love letter from long ago. His own ardent declarations are sounded forth—probably

for the first and last time—in a Milanese park swallowed up by fog at dawn. When she has finished reading, he merely asks: “who wrote that?”

2.6 Laughter, and speech undone

Throughout Hyperion ’64, the protagonist-flautist Gazzelloni never sings or speaks; he does nothing with his breath other than play the flute. This gesture to the externalization of the voice through wind instruments has a prestigious lineage stemming from the post-Enlightenment period. We need only think of the eponymous instrument, as well as Papageno’s charmed bells, in Mozart’s The Magic Flute to find a long historical seam of voices channelled and rationalized by instrumental means. For Maderna, the idea of the instrumentally purified voice—especially by way of the flute, given his close collaboration with Gazzelloni—was a recurrent poetic idea. Indeed, it was an obsession most prominent in theatrical works in which the abdication of sung or spoken words became something of a moral marker. In his radio opera Don Perlimplin (1962), the tragic hero of the opera’s literary source—García Lorca’s play by the same title—is portrayed by a flautist unable to put into words his love for his beautiful new wife, a querulous soprano. The same gender split between mellifluous women and muted men gathered further allegorical charge in 1963, when Maderna collaborated briefly with Pierpaolo Pasolini on a ballet entitled Vivo and Coscienza about a mute peasant, Vivo

28 The discussion of the odd, incapacitating link between the bells and the physiology of Papageno’s speech organs, as well as a fascinating connection between the bells and the sound of laughter, is found in Carolyn Abbate, In Search of Opera (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 77-80.
(who would therefore have been “voiced” by instrumental music in the pit), whose muteness protects him from the wiles of a soprano impersonating the rigors of Italian Marxist ideology: “Coscienza”—“[class] consciousness.”

Hyperion ’64’s lead character belongs to this genealogy of speechless heroes. He resorts to his flute as a substitute for voice, as though to reclaim the sonic space around him—reclaim it, that is, from the hostile forces that seem imperceptibly to shape it. Yet his is an impossible battle, as he constantly struggles to communicate through an instrument that prevents him from singing and speaking. What becomes most obvious in the Hyperion cycle at large, indeed, is the extent to which the abstraction from articulated speech granted by instrumental voice is a double-edged sword in Maderna. It works simultaneously as a nod towards and a reversal of the German Romantic ideal of instrumental melody as a voice above and beyond the strictures of speech—an ideal that was, significantly, very much a product of the place and time in which Hölderlin’s Hyperion was drafted. While the abdication of semantics may lend Don Perlimplin, the flautist in Hyperion, and Vivo a degree of moral superiority, these characters are also

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29 Pasolini and Maderna never realized their project for Vivo e Coscienza, but their exchange is documented in “Il progetto di un ‘balletto cantato’ con libretto di P.P. Pasolini: Vivo e Coscienza” in Bruno Maderna: studi e testimonianze, Rossana Dalmonte and Marco Russo, eds. (Lucca: LIM, 2004), 285-94. Pasolini would use a similar idea in his film Uccellacci e uccellini (1966), in which two simple-minded friars are instructed to spread the word of God to the animal kingdom by learning the animals’ language.

30 Carolyn Abbate discusses the interplay between “natural” and “unnatural” voices in Mozart’s Magic Flute in which she discusses the substitution of flute for voice. See Carolyn Abbate, In Search of Opera (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 79: “flute and pipes, played with the mouth, entail an absolute suppression of the voice. They are wind instruments that substitute for singing, with melody but no words.”
scored in ominous ways by Maderna. Their mute purity is ultimately sterile—they are good men undone by their inability to speak their mind.\footnote{The theme of the male lead undone by an inability to express himself is a trope of twentieth-century musical stage works, and it often works as an allegory for social disenfranchisement. It is, for instance, the premise of Stravinsky’s *L’Histoire du soldat* (1918), a work that had a very rich performance history in post-war Milan, starting with the performance Giorgio Strehler’s Piccolo teatro in 1953. A similar significance can be attributed to the dry *Sprechgesang* that tells the impoverished barber Wozzeck apart from his singing fellow characters in Berg’s *Wozzeck* (1925). In Britten’s *Billy Budd* (1951), a young sailor helplessly stutters his way towards his own tragic demise. Maderna’s premise is, in a way, similar to that of Stravinsky’s *Histoire* (a violin substituting for speech), but without the Brechtian irony that distinguishes Stravinsky’s work. Hyperion’s flute is unalienable, almost in-built into the character’s body; also, Maderna scores the flute part as a fully lyrical melodic display, a far cry from the stylized, balletic music of Stravinsky’s soldier.}

2.7 The Unmagical Flute

But *Hyperion ’64* is not just homage to mythology, or to the long history of flutes as displacements of voices, or to the noble and poetic state of speechlessness. The culture of its time, its Milanese burdens as we might call them, are always co-presences. The vagaries of instrumental vocality are unfolded, across the arch of the opera’s performance, alongside far more contemporary anxieties with regards to oral communication and the political distribution of space.

The disquieting resonances between these two conceptions of the voice—one grounded in instrumental melody, the other in contemporary linguistic and political
concerns—reaches a climax in the last third of the opera, from the fifth to the seventh and final scene. Recall the transition to the fifth scene, where the flautist first tries to play, and is interrupted by the electronic bell sounds and the descending cascade of steel partitions that occlude his sight both through sound and with visible walls. At this point, the orchestra kicks in, waging its own sonorous onslaught against him. As the orchestra becomes more frenzied, the physical space surrounding the flautist changes: the metallic partitions are lit with blue and pink light; the light steadily grows in intensity, ultimately blinding the hapless musician, who is dwarfed by the giant shadows of orchestral musicians appearing against the luminous backdrop. But as scene five begins, there is an acoustic triumph for the flautist, when he regains control of the space through a single sound, a high note he plays as though he were extracting it from the orchestral flutes, and grafting it onto his own sonorous body:

As soon as he has extracted that sound from the orchestra, he physically transports it into the place where he set up the music stands. The orchestra stops playing. On that one, almost stolen sound, the soloist structures his concert. It’s a brief piece, heart-rending and sweet.

We do not know what the lighting or staging did at the moment of the flautist’s solo in 1964. In a subsequent, video-recorded performance, the stage darkens and a spotlight

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33 Typescript scene synopsis, 4: “Come ha estratto dall’orchestra quell suono se lo trasporta fisicamente nel luogo dove ha sistemato I leggii; l’orchestra smette di suonare. Su quell’unico suono quasi rubato il solista organizza ora il suo concerto. È un breve pezzo di lacerante dolcezza.”
narrates around him, establishing his body as the pivotal point. The long-held tone that opens the solo—placed in the most resonant register of the flute—has a distinctly vocal quality. An incantatory monody ensues, lilting between slow, arched phrases within vocal range, and high spasmodic birdsong. But it is not to last: as the flautist reaches his lyrical climax, “a brief laugh fills the whole stage.”

This laugh is, however, utterly unlike the spontaneous audience giggles that are heard when the flautist’s scripted maladroitness causes merriment five minutes into the performance. Back then, the flautist continued unfazed—the real audience can’t disturb him. Now, however, he stops in his tracks.

This laugh is not the first time the flautist is interrupted by off-stage sounds; it is the first time, however, that he is genuinely hampered by a human voice. This laugh’s provenience—that is, both its visual source and its semiotic connotations—is untraceable; it is a double acousmêtre. We cannot see the laughing body. But more than this, the laughter is unmotivated, lacking any comical prompt for its hilarity. Why does it laugh? Is it omniscient—does it know something we don’t—with that special omniscience typical of voices issuing from behind veils and partitions?  

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34 The spotlight is a detail from the only video recording available for Hyperion at the Maderna Archives in Bologna; this is a recording a performance in Venice, 14 December 1977; this video is catalogued as “V2,” and listed along with the materials for Hyperion ’64 (as a revival performance), but a closer scrutiny reveals many details of the performance not to be applicable to the synopsis, stage notes and audio recording of the premiere.

35 Typescript scene synopsis, 5: “Quando il concerto per flauto è arrivato al Massimo del suo concentrato lirismo una breve risata riempie tutto il palcoscenico.”

36 This resonates with what John Morreall terms the “superiority theory” of humor, which holds that laughing signals the fact that the laugher deems herself superior to another (usually human) being. This theory is most famously offered by Aristotle in his distinction between tragedy and comedy in the Poetics, and very common in theories of
And yet this particular act of laughter also suggests a body altogether less powerful, a speaking mouth and throat convulsed without will or purpose. Indeed, the timbre of this laughter tells us that a recorded voice has been tampered with to produce the sound; it is mutedly shrill, lacking in resonance, much like the sound of voice on sped-up tape. The voice that interrupts the flautist’s solo mid-flight derives its power from a laughter that suspends it between boundless phatic power and aphasia, spontaneity and machination, intellectual superiority and mindless vocal shudder.

This moment of laughter, which silences the flute, the laughter with many possible effects and potential interpretations, acoustically indeterminate, is Hyperion’64’s great coup de théâtre. It’s the node at which the opera’s ahistorical mythologizing and its concrete time-and-place ideological underpinnings come together in an explosion. Indeed, such is its power that the stage moves along with the laughing acousmatic voice:

The metallic back wall of the stage opens slowly to reveal the presence of an enormous structure made of tinplate. The structure begins eventually to approach the front of the stage, while the soloist draws a few sounds of protest from his flute. The structure stops at the margins of the proscenium; its walls begin to open as darkness enfolds the stage. The taped sounds grow in intensity. Intermittent


37 The association of laughter with uncontrolled bodily movement—or even bodily failure—is something that Anca Parvulescu indentifies as a key aspect of twentieth-century philosophical thought on laughter, an aspect that dates to pre-enlightenment accounts of the passions—rather than more abstractly conceptualized “emotion” as embodied states. She identifies laughter as a state suspended between not so much between orality and vocality, but between orality and buccality. She writes “It is as if the opening of the mouth in laughter comes to remind us that the mouth has two Latin names: os and bucca. There is a mouth of orality and a mouth of buccality. Os/oris is […] the mouth, whether open or closed, connected to the voice and speaking. […] As for bucca, it is the more “primitive” mouth of breathing, sucking, eating.” Anca Parvulescu, Laughter: Notes on a Passion (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2010), 9-10.
colored lights appear in the darkness, then the sudden blaze of a blowtorch reveals the backlit contours of a huge metallic machine constituted by large self-moving arms and four large moving wheels.\textsuperscript{38}

As with the metallic bell sounds and the steel partitions, acousmatic sound is intimately tied with the physical, unfathomable sliding of spatial boundaries. The movement now unfolds the body of the acousmêtre in a game of Russian dolls—a machine hiding within a machine.

Maderna and Puecher may have gotten this gesture from a fabled earlier source: Fritz Lang’s \textit{The Testament of Doctor Mabuse} (1933), a film frequently referenced by Michel Chion for its astonishing sound design. In the film, the source of Doctor Mabuse’s commanding voice is revealed to be nothing but a recorded voice issuing from a gramophone behind a curtain.\textsuperscript{39} But again, the urban cultural context of 1930s Berlin is not that of 1960s Milan, and disquiet about the machine and its voice necessarily takes different forms and has difference resonance. The voice of Lang’s Mabuse speaks flawless German, whereas the garish machine in \textit{Hyperion ’64} does not utter a single intelligible word. Throughout this scene, its laughter slowly morphs into snarled aggregates of phonemes, delivered like a series of inchoate orders. Within the dramatic arch of \textit{Hyperion ’64}, the vocal sounds produced by this machine are strangely familiar:

\textsuperscript{38} Typescript scene synopsis, 5: “La parete di metallo che chiudeva il fondo del palcoscenico si apre lentamente e rivela la presenza di una enorme costruzione in lamiera metallica. La costruzione comuncia poi lentamente ad avanzare verso la ribalta mentre il solista strappa dal suo flauto qualche suono di protesta. La costruzione arresta la sua cosa ai margini del boccascena; le sue pareti cominciano a scorrere aprendosi mentre il buio invade la scena. I suoni provenienti dal nastro magnetico aumentano di intensità. Nel buio appaiono ora delle luci colorate intermittenti, poi scoppia la luce di una fiamma ossidrica che rivela in contoluce la struttura di una enorme macchina metallica costituita da grandi bracci semoventi e da quattro grandi ruote mobili.”

\textsuperscript{39} Michel Chion, \textit{The Voice in the Cinema}, 33-35.
after all, this is a performance that began with yelling backstage workers and an audience giggling at a flautist. Both the worker’s yelling—unintelligible because dialectal and because traditionally foreign to the sonic space of the stage proper—and the audience’s giggles—prompted by the script and yet “unheard” across the fourth wall—were acousmatic because of their distribution within the political microcosm of the theater. They are sounds which belong to the theater by dint (there’s no show without a responsive audience or working technicians) of being banned from the stage, voices not meant to be minded as meaningful utterances. And yet, half an hour after the opening, they reappear as the voice of a strange body—one apparently hostile to the protagonist—who appears wired with the very workings of the stage’s partitions, lights, and sound system.

2.8 The Poetics of the Politicized Voice

It would be easy to read the workings of the stage, tape compositions and opening vociferations as a set up of the lead character as the tragic bearer of a beleaguered musical high-art. Yet I wish to delve into the subterranean network of vocal sounds we have thus encountered as a way of sketching out a subtler, and far more disquieting, poetics and politics of the voice at work in Hyperion '64. Within this network, laughter plays a pivotal symbolic role, and the fact that the vocal acousmêtre in scene five laughs—rather than utter any other kind of non semantic sound—is a thus a detail of
great importance, as is the fact that this laughter degrades into snarls and oral aggression. Unlike other vocal sounds that can be said to belong to the sphere of vocality before language—crying, sighing, groaning—laughter has an irreducible relation to language (only those can speak can laugh). As an exclusively human phenomenon, laughter precedes the ability to speak, and could thus be classified within the sphere of the pre-linguistic babble that had fascinated Roman Jakobson some twenty years prior to Hyperion ’64. “A child, during his babbling period,” wrote Jakobson,

Can accumulate articulations which are never found within a single language or even a group of languages: consonants of any points of articulation, palatalized and rounded consonants, sibilants, affricates, clicks, complex vowels, diphthongs, etc.  

As Daniel Heller-Roazen recently suggested, what Jakobson is evoking here (filtered through the jargon of structural phonology) is something of an originary state of grace, an infinite potentiality for all speech. It is as the key to this realm of radical invention that laughter would be evoked, only two years after Hyperion ’64, in the famous opening of The Order of Things.

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read […] all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered

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surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things.\textsuperscript{42}

Following a tradition of thought that had started with Georges Bataille, Foucault hears laughter—especially his own laughter—as a temporary, reversible regression to the carnality of the speaking mouth in which language and thought are born anew. He has no doubt that he will immediately find his way back to articulated language after laughter subsides.

Consoling ideas, almost cheerful in their view of laughter. But what Hyperion '64 shows is such accounts of laughter as a kind of vacation spot—a place outside responsibility, or the laboriousness of everyday life—risk discounting history and culture: they verge on the apolitical.\textsuperscript{43} Maderna and Puecher staged a dystopian counterpoint to


\textsuperscript{43} By apolitical here I mean not unconcerned with issues of community, belonging and exclusion, but rather unmoored from the specific politics of language at a particular time and place. It is this “unmooring” that grants the concept of laughter its positive connotation, the generative connotations of the burst or explosion of laughter. Georges Bataille’s account of laughter is overtly tied to the idea of the origin or dismantling of community, and the liberating explosion of a particular philosophical language (that of Hegel). Following Bataille’s lead, laughter would take on similarly generative qualities in the thought of Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy, and more recently, feminist and gender theory such as Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. On the peculiar inapplicability of laughter’s joyous outburst to a concrete political realm, see Parvulescu, \textit{Laughter}, 11: by way of a disclaimer, that “it is important to emphasize, as Nancy does, that there is no ‘sublime truth’ of laughter, withdrawn from ‘art.’ It is in fact only from within language, or rather
Foucault’s noble-savage laughter, one in which laughter is heard as a powerful disabler of articulated speech, a convulsion capable of irrevocably overpowering the physiological ability to speak into a peal of vocalized breath. The grim understanding of language necessary to devise the laughter in Dimensioni II is, in Maderna’s case, an inescapable historically and geographically specific attitude. It is not a coincidence that both of the pre-existing tape pieces used in Hyperion ’64—Dimensioni II and Le Rire—are the sections of Hyperion ’64 that bear the closest relation to the city of Milan. Indeed, the Studio di Fonologia where Maderna composed these two pieces between 1960 and 1962 was hosted and affiliated with the Milan headquarters of RAI, the crucible of state-run linguistic reform from the mid-fifties into the early sixties. These operations, which involved the under-representation of local dialect in favour of a standardized official Italian promoted through national entertainment, were viewed with bemusement and even suspicion by left-wing men of letters—such as Maderna’s friend Umberto Eco and his erstwhile collaborator, Pier Paolo Pasolini, to name but a few. These thinkers saw in the promotion of a new spoken tongue the diffusion of an airborne State ideology that engendered consumerism and mindless political consent at an almost carnal level of language: the speaking mouth.

With respect to this perceived linguistic homologation, the aural image of laughter takes on unusual resonances: it becomes the blueprint of the mindless acquisition of a state-controlled orality. As the involuntary reflex proper to speaking bodies, laughter was the proper sound of the fabricated political compliance induced by the new language.

at its limit, a limit exposed by the artifices of art, that we can hope to listen to echoes of laughter.”
Writing about the host of a popular TV show, Eco would wryly observe: “[he] has no sense of humor; he laughs because he is happy with reality, not because he is able to affect reality.”44 While laugh-tracks would not enter Italian television until the import of American sit-coms in the 1970s, the regulation and eliciting of laughter in live audience was certainly part of the sound design of the Milanese TV shows of the 1950s, creating the aural sense of an attending public in the studio that was rarely seen on camera. Years later, in 1985, Federico Fellini would comment on the mind-numbing, quasi-automated consent already fostered in Italian TV in terms strikingly germane to the grim undertones of Maderna’s composed laughter:

The spectator becomes habituated to a hiccuping, stuttering language, to the suspension of mental activity […] the upending of any articulated syntax has the only result of creating an endless audience of illiterate people ready to laugh and get excited and applaud anything that is fast, meaningless and repetitive.45

Fellini’s abhorrent TV audience, just like the laughing acousmêtre in Hyperion ’64, does not laugh because it is amused. Instead, laughter erupts because the spectacle is “fast, meaningless, repetitive,” mimetically calling forth the spasmodic voice of laughter as a senseless reflex. Laughter is their proper utterance, a surrogate for linguistic

44 Eco, “Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno,” 33: “Mike Bongiorno è privo di senso dell'umorismo. Ride perché è contento della realtà, non perché sia capace di deformare la realtà.”
45 Federico Fellini, quoted in Aldo Grasso, Radio e televisione: teorie, analisi, storie, esercizi (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 2000), 131: “Lo stravolgimento di qualsiasi sintassi articolata ha come unico risultato quello di creare una sterminata platea di analfabeti pronti a ridere, e a esaltarsi, ad applaudire tutto quello che è veloce, privo di senso e ripetitivo.”
intentionality. Mechanized by the artificial new orality of their common tongue, the TV audience has lost the physiological ability to speak its mind.46

The laughter that opens Dimensioni II was composed but a few floors away from the cackling audiences that were to so repulse Fellini, and indeed, a closer look at it reveals a similarly grim outlook towards language. According to the programme note for the tape materials in Hyperion ’64, the materials for Dimensioni II consisted of vocal phonemes selected and notated in the International Phonetic Alphabet for Maderna by the poet Hans G. Helms, and then recorded as discrete units by Cathy Berberian. This means that, in all likelihood, what the audience heard in Hyperion ’64 could have been not a distorted recording of laughter, but a manufactured laughter, assembled from an array of vocal phonemes. Helms describes his selection and ordering of the phonemes for Maderna as if he were the assistant mixing the colours for a painter:

As the means to the work I have used 35 consonants, one semi-vowel, and fifteen vowels, phonemes that recur in a similar fashion in Arabic, Danish, German, English, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Czech and Welsh. Only two sounds of a non-phonemic nature are used: a) a cough; b) an inhaled

46 Such views may seem antiquated now, of course. This apocalyptic state of mind, so widespread among intellectuals in the 1960s, has been thoroughly criticized in recent histories of the Italian media, that of Milan in particular. According to this more recent view, the aversion towards the linguistic changes brought by mass media can be understood historically: they belonged first and foremost to the literary intelligentsia who felt themselves usurped by the reconfigured language and forms of sociality within the newly mediatic city. Thus, a sense of personal injury lurks behind the most extravagant rhetorical flourishes, such as Pasolini’s essay “9 Dicembre 1973: Acculturazione e acculturazione,” in which the author writes: “Un giornale fascista e le scritte sui cascinali di slogans mussoliniani fanno ridere: come (con dolore) l’aratro rispetto a un trattore. Il fascismo, voglio ripeterlo, non è stato sostanzialmente in grado nemmeno di scalfire l’anima del popolo italiano; il nuovo fascismo, attraverso i nuovi mezzi di comunicazione e di informazione (specie, appunto la televisione), non solo l’ha scalfita, ma l’ha lacerata, violata bruttata per sempre…” Scritti corsari (Milan: Garzanti, 1975), 31-34: 34.
aspiration. The frequency of each of the phonemes between number 1 and number 18 is established according to a plan that is nearly serial. 47

Helms’ laundry list of vocal sounds is, in itself, not especially interesting: the serial use of recorded phonemes was common in early 1960s European and American electronic music. Yet Maderna’s use of these phonemes—judging from the opening laughter of Dimensioni II—is something of an oddity: it amounts not just to assembling the phonemes according to pitch organization, but in sequencing into the aural impression of laughter, the very unhinged orality that Helms’s preparatory classification of phonemes had dismantled. It is telling that Helms did not include vocalized non-phonemic sounds in his materials: beyond coughing and breathing, all vocal sounds must slot into his linguistic autopsy of the voice. Far from a spontaneous outburst, then, laughter becomes indicative of a speech wrenched from functionality and quartered into phonemic fragments, the undoing of language as meaningful utterance.

Maderna was not, alas, a prolific writer or speaker on his own—or indeed anyone else’s—music, and thus interpretations of his approach to laughter are necessarily the product of speculation. Yet a precious detail with regards to his attitude towards laughter as a vocal phenomenon can be extrapolated with regards to the other tape composition used in Hyperion ’64: namely, Le Rire. The origin of the title—a reference to Henri Bergson’s essay by the same title—would be recounted years later by Maderna’s friend, the musicologist Luigi Rognoni:

47 Hans Helms, program note for Dimensioni II, reproduced in the program notes for Hyperion’s premiere (Venice: Venice Biennale, 1964), 20.
I remember how *Le Rire* was born, in 1962, the last of Bruno’s compositions of that period. He had recorded the voice of Marino Zuccheri [the chief technician at the Studio di Fonologia in those years] and then elaborated it with sinusoidal sounds, filtering and superimposition. When I heard it, I said to him that it seemed to me a demonstration of the definition Bergson gave of laughter: ‘Something mechanical encrusted on the living’. So, he said, we shall call it *Le Rire*.48

Rognoni’s anecdote contains an essential—but, to the best of my knowledge, thus far undetected—misreading of Henri Bergson’s essay, which concerns the nature of the comic, but not the phenomenon of laughter itself. To define the act of laughing as a mechanical excrescence—one that Rognoni understands to correspond to the electronic distortions and manipulations of Zuccheri’s voice—is to highlight its aspect as a negative force, an in-built malfunction or distortion of the speaking voice. Another detail of the anecdote is telling: unlike *Dimensioni II*, *Le Rire* does not contain—with the exception of two very brief moments—laughing sounds. It is thus possible that Rognoni thought not only, or even primarily, of the sound of laughter as the product of musical composition.

Instead, laughter could here be working as a metaphor for the very way in which the recorded voice is manipulated by Maderna. Accepted readily as title for a lengthy composition mostly devoid of laughter, the overwhelming—indeed, mechanical—spasms of the speaking voice are likened to the process by which—in Maderna’s case—music is made.

Puecher and Maderna’s decision to pit these laughter against the flautist’s playing in *Hyperion ’64* is, therefore, a subtle dramaturgical set up. Not only is the speaking voice shown—through laughter—in its infinite potential for misunderstanding and malfunction, but these disruptions resonate with the self-defeating virtuosity of the flautist himself. For all his prowess, and all his lyricism, he is still unable to speak. Laughter and instrumental monody share, then, the same melancholy senselessness, they are both produced by means of an “asportation” of semantics from language, and a patterning of the remains into melody. The acousmatic laughter that breaks out during the flautist’s solo commands his silence, but not because it is a form of mockery or social repression.49 What silences the flautist is, instead, the grim kinship he detects between his rhapsody and the sound of mechanized laughter: if we listen closely, we will detect a striking similarity between the contour and register of his melody and the laughter it elicits, a similarity that reveals his pure melody to amount, even at the height of its lyrical intensity, to a nefarious undoing of meaningful speech.50 The protagonist of *Hyperion ’64*, whose speech is hindered by the flute that is also its only means of communication, may attempt to soar above linguistic trappings through pure melody, but his voice is never going to amount to more than a linguistic malfunction.

### 2.9 Unexpected Voices (II): *Aria*


50 Cf. Manuscript stage notes, p. 6; a progression seems to be implied where the taped giggles parody the sounds of the flautist’s monody. The manuscript has an annotation reading: “Risate: […] alta e bassa […] rima suoni […] risate e parodia suoni e trillo […] risata vocalizzo,” where “parodia suoni e trillo” seems to imply a parody of the sounds and trills of the flautist’s part.
After the babbling machine arrives on stage in scene 5, the opera reaches a rather violent climax: the machine opens (yet another Russian doll effect) to reveal a group of mimes who move in sinister unison to the raucous warbles of the acousmêtre. The mimes silently simulate the motions of robots, men at war, and a group of fanatic religious worshippers.\(^{51}\) The outburst eventually subsides, the acousmêtre murmurs a few more incomprehensible words, this time pensively, before the metallic partitions close in on the prostrated mimes. We have reached the seventh and final scene of the opera. The flautist is, again, alone onstage, and immediately begins to do what he does best: he plays an impassioned, forlorn solo. This time, the musical incantation seems to work—nothing and no-one interrupts him for nearly two minutes, a stretch of time that by now feels remarkably long. Eventually he is interrupted by the orchestra, but very gently: they carpet the lower registers beneath him with a hushed thudding of strings, harps and timpani.\(^{52}\) The familiar narrative scheme we have witnessed throughout the opera (flute

\(^{51}\) Cf. Typescript scene synopsis, 5-6: “Al posto della macchina da luna park c’è ora a terra un gruppo di forme indistinte buttate le une sulle altre, come un residuo lasciato dalla macchina. Obbedendo agli ordini assurdi del nastro magnetico la massa informe si scinde dopo alcuni lenti conati in tante particelle che rotolano qua e là per il palcoscenico. […] Le figure si tendono poi in una serie di gesti che alludono a una sorta di solidarietà; ma una volta allacciatesi le une alle altre un ordine trasforma il blocco così formatosi in una specie di macchina imagnata in un lavoro meccanico; Al culmine del ritmo la luce si spegne di colpo per riaccendersi brevemente su alcune brevissime scene di violenza in cui sono impregnate le figure; una lotta, un’imboscata, una fucilazione, un’aggressione, una strage. […] Un ultimo buio, poi tutte le figure appaiono in ginocchio di spalle al pubblico: si trascinano in una grottesca processione verso il fondale metallico sul quale nel frattempo è apparso un enorme simbolo luminoso che allude ad una condizione religiosa. Le pareti della costruzione si richiudono su quest’ultima imagine.”

\(^{52}\) The sonority that opens aria is created by using the strings, harp and timpani in such a way as to minimize resonance while keeping attack highly audible: *col legno* strings, *presso sulla tavola* harps, and timpani played with brushes. All textual references to *Aria*
solo—interruption—movement of stage machinery and lighting) is iterated one last time; the metallic partitions slide open to the sound of the orchestra’s clicks and taps, but this time a lone woman (the soprano Catherine Geyer) emerges from behind them and proceeds to do the—by now—truly unexpected: she begins to sing.

What follows is a lengthy aria for soprano and orchestra, to this day the most celebrated part of Hyperion ’64, which is to say, the one that has had something closest to a traditional textual afterlife: it has been published and recorded as a discrete composition entitled Aria. The reason behind the textual fixity afforded to Aria—a song-piece pervaded by arched phrases and a soft, Bergian atonality—was, paradoxically, its reception as a delayed uncovering of the human voice. The commentator in the audio recording of the premiere even notes the soprano’s arrival on stage by announcing that she will sing “the final words of freedom and true life.” The famous Italian music critic Massimo Mila would similarly comment—in more academic terms—on its “expressionistic pathos,” singling out Aria as the most poignant (and musically accomplished) part of the opera. It will serve us, by way of conclusion, to sketch out the ways in which it belongs—rather than escapes from—the network of senses and politics that constitutes Hyperion ’64.

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53 Massimo Mila, Maderna musicista europeo, 56: “Hyperion è forse un torso incompiuto, un’opera problematica o piuttosto una proposta di opera gettata all’iniziativa d’un regista creativo. Ma ben compiuto e perfetto è l’a solo di soprano che la chiude—o almeno a Venezia la chiudeva—con suoni ultraterreni.” [Hyperion may be an unfinished torso, a problematic opera, or rather the proposal for an opera left to the initiative of a creative director. But the soprano solo that closes it with unearthly sounds—or at least that closed it in Venice—is fully finished and perfected.]
Aria is staged as something like a concert performance—the soprano appears from behind partitions sliding open like curtains, and delivers her song in stillness, likely facing the audience throughout. The concert aria set-up seems far from a casual choice in an opera whose entire plot consists of a flautist’s botched attempts at a performance. And yet, if within Hyperion ’64 Aria provides closure by virtue of resembling a successful concert performance, the performance is also riddled with the same issue of linguistic alienation that has haunted the stage thus far. The text sung is an excerpt from Hölderlin’s Hyperion, sung in the original German and thus—both because of the difficulty of deciphering sung text, the foreignness of the language, and the convolutions typical of late eighteenth century literary German—probably unintelligible to most of the audience.54 The detail of the text’s incomprehensibility would be negligible within a concert performance or within even a traditional—that is, sung—operatic work. In a more conventional setting, that is, the incomprehensibility of the text in Aria might have absorbed by the peculiar linguistic suspension of disbelief expected of operatic audiences: the trust that, though one does not understand what is being sung, it is both meaningful and dramatically pregnant. Yet all such trust has been destroyed by the time Aria is performed in Hyperion ’64. The song falls upon an audience who has been steadily dispossessed of meaningful linguistic utterances for over the course of forty or so

54 Even Massimo Mila, one of the most steadfast champions of this piece, makes a note of the possible language barrier, despite asserting Aria’s place in the universal canon of art song: “Accostiamoci dunque a questa grande pagina vocale, nella quale purtroppo è requisito indispensabile la percezione del testo tedesco, poiché la parola—significato e suono—e l’immagine musicale si fondono inextricabilmente secondo la più alta tradizione del canto espressivo di tutti i tempi.” [Let us now approach this great vocal piece; it is unfortunately indispensible to have an ear for the German language, because the word—sound and meaning—is inextricably welded to the musical imagery, according to the highest tradition of expressive singing.] Mila, Maderna musicista europeo, 57.
minutes; it is delivered by an unidentified female singer from a stage that has thus far been inhabited by bodies—the workers, that of the laughing, babbling machine—who did not seem to belong to it. Although Aria reinstates the convention of the lyrical voice in the theater, it does so within a space in which that very convention has been rendered unfamiliar. Cast within an aural network of dysfunctional speech, Aria can hardly provide the comfort of melos’ universal appeal, for now melos is itself the intrusive element that doesn’t belong, that fails to signify.

Aria consists of a setting of one the fragments of Hölderlin’s novel, a missive written in the first person by Hyperion. In Hyperion ’64, Hölderlin’s hero never treads the stage as a full-fledged dramatis personae; instead he is evoked only implicitly in the character of flautist, who remains unnamed and is—as we have seen—vocally impaired. From the vantage point of textual analysis, then, Aria appears as something far more elaborate than a mere vocal piece: it is instead a piece about the problem of the singing voice. By setting Hyperion’s letter to music, then, Maderna seems to wish to “lend voice” to the elusive youth who lends his name to the opera, finally allowing Hyperion to speak—or rather, sing—his mind. And yet, the voice that’s been “leant” to Hyperion is indeed no more than a loan. It is the voice of an unnamed female singer who—like a hired musician showing up for a gig—arrives on stage, sings, and then and exits as soon as she’s done. Far from granting us closure, Hyperion’s voice in Aria plunges us deeper still into the realm of the expropriated voice, of the acousmatic. Indeed, so self-conscious is this late arrival at the euphonious human voice, that the text of Aria begins with Hyperion briefly reflecting on the sound of his own voice. The opening of the fragment reads:
The past lay before me like an immense, frightening desert and with fierce stubbornness I tore and destroyed every trace of that which once soothed and ennobled my heart. Then I rose up again with a fierce laughter directed at myself and at everything, I listened with joy to its frightful echo, and the howling of jackals, who crept up on me from every side across the night, did much good to my ravaged soul.\footnote{”Wie eine lange entsetzliche Wüste lag die Vergangenheit da vor mir, und mit höllischem Grimme vertilgt ich jeden Rest von dem, was einst mein Herz gelabt hatte und erhoben. Dann fuhr ich wieder auf mit wütendem Hohngelächter über mich und alles, lauschte mit Lust dem gräßlichen Widerhall, und das Geheul der Tschakale, das durch die Nacht her von allen Seiten gegen mich drang, tat meiner zerrütteten Seele wirklich wohl.” program notes for Hyperion’s premiere (Venice: Venice Biennale, 1964), 21-22. It is worth noting that in the program notes, the text is reproduced (along with an Italian translation) without any indication as to its use in the opera, thus making it even harder for audience members to discern the meaning of the text in Aria.}

Maderna sets the melancholy opening words as a gentle lyrical crescendo, starting the vocal part with half-voiced step-wise motion, animating it with the rumble of low strings and sustained chromatic stepwise motion and then returning to low swelling dynamic arches, rising in whole-tone steps on the words “und erhoben” [“and ennobled”] and coming to rest on a soft minor-seventh chord on the final syllable. Then—and for the last time in the opera—laughter intervenes to shatter the lyrical tone. As she sings of Hyperion’s mirthless laughter, the soprano drops the singing register in favour of a whispered Sprechgesang, while the orchestra stops playing altogether. Her voice withdraws towards speech at the mention of laughter’s outburst, giving song up at the very moment in which the hero’s voice comes closest to pealing out from the literary text. For all its celebrated lyricism, then, Aria also functions as the set up for one last, mysterious voice to pervade the stage of Hyperion ’64. The end of Hyperion ’64 stages of the tension of literacy and orality as something of a double mise-en-abyme: a voice
rendering a text that itself describes the sound of voice, but also a voice speaking, in a
tongue incomprehensible to its listeners, about another suspension of linguistic sense—
laughter. This is what it means to hear Hyperion’s voice: we hearken to the vocal
rendition of a text describing a convulsed utterance, delivered by a female body who
inhabits the stage without belonging to it, and sings and speaks in a tongue unintelligible
to those who hear it.

To listen to Hyperion ’64 amidst this network of Milanese acousmêtres is no mere
matter of suturing text and context: as we have had the opportunity to note several times
through these pages, this is an opposition that dissolves as we survey the scattered traces
left by the cycle as a whole. What emerges from the resonances we have thus far
uncovered is something of a halting poetics of the voice. Here is a voice unmagical,
tethered by language to the ruins of history. Binaries of vocality and orality cannot guide
us through Hyperion ’64—for there is no voice in it that overcomes the vagaries of
language. Instead, the opera seems to ask: what is produced by the failure of oral
communication? From the flautist’s broken monodies, the babble of theater workers, and
the laughter that bounces from audience, to tape, to the soprano’s strange song, music
emerges as the secret archive of broken linguistic encounters—a reservoir of non-
semantic traces disseminated across the sprawl of the city’s soaring modernity.
3.1 Introduction

Milan, 19 November 1969, 12 noon. In the heart of the city center, on the streets surrounding the Duomo, two crowds converge. The first, a large group of Union workers, are gathered in the Teatro Lirico—there is a General Strike all over Italy, the grievance being a rise in the cost of housing. A second group, an assortment of extra-parliamentary left-wing organizations whose Italian crop was in full flourish by 1968, is marching down Via Larga. Since the Teatro Lirico is also on Via Larga, the workers leaving their assembly mingle with the other demonstrators. The crowd swells and heaves. The police intervene. After a few moments, the scene has degenerated: the police, in vans, move towards the demonstrators; the demonstrators find steel tubes in a nearby building site and use them as weapons. A police officer driving one of the vans—Antonio Annarumma—dies in the struggle, in circumstances that remain unclear to this day.

Competing accounts of the event appear almost instantly. Italy’s president, Giuseppe Saragat, releases a public statement laced with imagery of a body politic assailed by lethal pathogens:
Questo odioso crimine deve ammonire tutti ad isolare, e a mettere in condizione di non nuocere i delinquenti, il cui scopo è la distruzione della vita.¹

[This odious crime must serve a warning to all: to isolate [the criminals] and put them in a condition of no longer being noxious; their purpose is the destruction of life.]

Many demonstrators were illegally incarcerated for several months awaiting trial. The leading left-wing newspaper L’Unità published eyewitness accounts from both striking workers and from a judge (Domenico Politanò) at the Milan tribunal, who maintained that “[the police carried out] an aggressive act on a peaceful demonstration.”² Other commentators, including left-wing writer Nanni Balestrini, maintained that the police attacked first, that Annarumma collided with another police van, and that his death was subsequently framed as murder in order to antagonize the extra-parliamentary left.³ The CISL—the Italian Confederation of Workers’ Unions—suggested that the extremist left-wing groups were of “suspect provenience,” meaning that they might have been infiltrated, perhaps by neo-fascists seeking to pin a political murder on the left.⁴ Slogans

³ Ibid.: “Nel corso degli incidenti muore l’agente Annarumma, sicuramente nel corso di uno scontro con un’altra camionetta della polizia. Le foto e le testimonianze lo dimostrano chiaramente, ma ciò nonostante la responsabilità viene data ai dimostranti…” [Over the course of the clashes, agent Annarumma died—definitely during the crash [of his vehicle] with another police van. Photos and witness accounts demonstrate this clearly, but the blame is to be laid on the demonstrators nonetheless…]
calling for revenge for Annarumma appeared on walls across the city. In the police barracks at the Milanese north-eastern district Bicocca, where Annarumma was usually stationed, the climate became increasingly exasperated. Far right press such as the weekly *Il Borghese* called for Milan to be occupied by the police. When a few days later Mario Capanna, leader of the Movimento Studentesco (the university’s leading left-wing group and part of the accused), attended the funeral of Annarumma to offer his condolences, he narrowly escaped lynching by a mob of enraged policemen.

The ensuing trial did little to calm this tense atmosphere. While responsibility for Annarumma’s death was officially attributed to the demonstrators, an individual culprit was never found: what the law produced was not the cathartic exhibition of a criminal body, but an immaterial moral shadow cast over a mercurial, disorderly crowd—a collective that could take on different political shades depending on the onlooker. Viewed from the hindsight of the decade to come, the whole episode—and the atmosphere it generated—was grimly familiar, and not unique to Italy. We are dealing, in other words, with the state of constant urban confrontation that characterized many nations during the height of the Cold War. This “low-intensity warfare”—the U.S. army term used to describe the situation in Italy, as well as in Greece, West Germany and Chile in the
1970s—saw the mobilization of official and unofficial police forces to curb left-wing political extremism. In Italy these episodes—which lent the decade the epithet *anni di piombo*, the years of lead—were characterized by deadly political violence: bombs detonated on trains, in railway stations and banks, the kidnapping and murder of politicians, activists, and members of the police force.

Yet even a cursory glance at the aftermath of episodes such as the death of Annarumma reveals that, beyond the crime itself, there was a specific “climate of representation”—to use Lisa Gitelman’s phrase—through which the event was codified into reports that rooted themselves in the memory of the city’s inhabitants.7 The climate was characterized by sensationalist public statements, such as Saragat’s avoidance of mentioning any political purpose behind the violence other than the “destruction of life.” Part of the atmosphere was also a crop of radically different accounts of the event, culminating in the failure of the legal system to produce a culprit. Michael Taussig called this particular kind of political atmosphere—which he analyzed in 1970s Colombia, a much more extreme case than the Italian one—“terror as usual,” indicating a pervasive, quotidian expectation of violence twinned with anxiety at being unable to predict the provenience or modality of the next attack. “Terror as usual” is—to Taussig—the product of a mediatic representational network in which violence was produced and symbolically propagated through a state of constant paranoia: “it was as if,” he muses, “accounts in the

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7 See Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2. I am here extending Gitelman’s concept, which concerns the reception of technological innovations such as recording technology, to the reception and representation (which is, as we will see, also mediated through recording technology) of a particular episode, its becoming “history.”
newspapers were designed to create and reproduce a tropical version of the Hobbesian world, nasty, brutish and short.”

A large component of these accounts was the documentary element, the truth-effect of unmediated evidence. Verbal media—newspaper articles, interviews, and so on—could embody terror insofar as they were shown merely to report on what seemed like unsettling documentary evidence. Yet visual evidence and its presentation were even more crucial to the building of such an atmosphere—from the typesetting of headlines, to the pictures included with the report, to the street-level “eye-witnesses” on which journalistic reports of this kind so heavily rely. Historians have since produced accounts of precisely the representational work performed by 1970s media, accounts that are largely based on an analysis of images and news clippings. In the case of Italy, a collective study was published in 2011 of an iconic image of Milan’s anni di piombo (a balaclava-wearing demonstrator pointing a gun at armed police), showing the work of representation evident in the technical features as well as press coverage of the photo.

There is, however, a pronounced dearth of critical studies about sound media in these same circumstances. This is an odd lacuna. After all, we are dealing with a historical period in which recording technology allows for extensive sonic documentation—not to mention surveillance—of events that could then be broadcast or even circulated as recordings. Is this lack of a critical history of political sound

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recordings simply a sign that recorded sound has lost the race against visual media as a source of proof, and thus as the subject of historical critique? Or is it that the act of recording sound is considered by default less mediated (more presence than representation) than visual reproduction, and thus, again, less worthy of critical attention? And if so, how might we begin to think of a representational climate for sound in these decades? What does it mean to listen to/in Taussig’s “terror as usual”?

In what follows, I want to address these questions by concentrating on the overlap between sound recording technology, representations of voice and language, and the particular climate of representation of the 1969-78 decade in Milan. I do so through a single, multifaceted exhibit: a recording of the 19 November Milan demonstration entitled *I fatti di Milano*—the events of Milan—released in January 1970 by Dischi del Sole, the discographic label of Milan’s neo-folk collective, *Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano*. Among the demonstrating crowd on 19 November 1969 were two members the Nuovo Canzoniere: Gianni Bosio (one of the collective’s intellectual leaders) and Silvio Ruggeri. Each was armed with a tape recorder, and each let the apparatus run as he navigated the crowded streets. The tapes were edited into a single Long Playing record and then released as part of a special collection entitled “archivi sonori,” sonic archives. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only recording of the demonstration on 19 November 1969.

*I fatti di Milano* is an anomaly in the Canzoniere’s output, and for several reasons. The first—seen by thumbing through the Canzoniere’s discographic catalogue—is that, to the best of my knowledge, it is one of only two records released by the Canzoniere in its sixteen years of activity (1962-1978) that was not only cut in Milan, but was also
about Milan, the city that hosted the collective and that represented its central field of action. The other example, released in May 1972 also for the “archivi sonori” collection, consists of an exercise in oral history: a collection of protest songs and interviews with workers striking at Milan’s Crouzet factory. Yet *I fatti di Milano*—whose title declares a belligerent adherence to evidence (“fatti” can, in other contexts, also mean “facts”)—is a far stranger creature than its younger sibling. Were we to play the record before looking at its packaging—thus letting the vinyl speak first—we would hear a tumultuous urban “soundscape.” Unlike the other Milanese record, *I fatti di Milano* provides no transcription of the recorded events: it is not, that is, an “oral history.” Indeed, it couldn’t be if it tried: little in the recorded material amounts to intelligible speech. Crowds babbling, police sirens, agitators’ voices, and political hymns blaring out from loudspeakers; occasionally, fleetingly, an agitated voice moves into aural focus and then fades away. We seem to be hearing something in between our current concept of a “soundscape” and an aural rendition of late nineteenth-century crowd theories: a simmering primordial soup of political eventfulness.¹⁰

The recording is, however, punctuated with unnerving intermittency (on average every three minutes in the fifty-three-minute duration) by post-produced captions announcing the exact place and time. This painstaking attention to journalistic detail would seem unnecessary until we turn to the LP sleeve, in which Bosio informs us that:

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¹⁰ The term “soundscape” deserves here to be treated with special historical awareness: although it is unlikely that Bosio (not a musically inclined person) would have been aware of this, Murray Schaeffer was launching his naturalist manifesto on the ecology of sound in these same years.
Il disco contiene una selezione da materiali più ampi registrati nei giorni che vanno dal 19 novembre al 4 dicembre 1969 per conto dell’istituto Ernesto De Martino. L’intera documentazione è stata affidata al Collegio di difesa per gli arrestati dei cosiddetti Fatti del Lirico. Il disco viene presentato con il titolo di Controinformazione, proponendosi di reagire alle versioni delle autorità preposte all’ordine pubblico e ai giornali cosiddetti d’ordine. Questo scopo più generale e dichiarato non ha impedito che la scelta fosse fatta con tutto lo scrupolo che è necessario a difendere le buone ragioni della verità. E, questa verità, dai nastri, dal documento sonoro sincrono, dalla testimonianza coeva, assume dimensioni assai precise e incontrovertibili.¹¹

[The LP contains a selection from a larger amount of material recorded between 19 November and 4 December 1969 on behalf of the Ernesto De Martino Institute. The entire documentation has been entrusted to the team for the defense of those arrested for the so-called “events of the Teatro Lirico.” The LP is presented here with the subtitle “counter-information,” and it is meant to challenge the version produced by the authorities in charge of public order and the official press. This general and explicit purpose has not prevented us from choosing the material with the care necessary to the reasoned presentation of truthful evidence. And this truth emerges with great precision and incontrovertible clarity from the tapes, from the synchronous sonic document, and from contemporary testimony.]

We will shortly return to a close analysis of the record’s sonic contents. For now, though, it’s important to note that Bosio thinks the LP is perfectly intelligible—its “great precision and incontrovertible clarity” able to compete with accounts such as those of the country’s leading newspapers. So intelligible, in fact, as to supply a function rarely asked of a soundscape: that of judicial proof. Of course, it is easy to discern some of the contradictions in Bosio’s statement: he admits to editing the tapes (which initially amounted to some four hours of material), and the frequency of the post-produced captions might betray a faltering belief in the recording’s ability to “speak for itself.” But what is important is that Bosio also acted in good faith: a note in the archive catalogues of Nuovo Canzoniere informs us that the original tapes were entrusted in 1969 to one of

¹¹ Gianni Bosio, record sleeve note to I fatti di Milano, Dischi del Sole, collection Archivi Sonori, SdL/AS/7.
Milan’s most famous leftist lawyers—Gianluca Maris—in whose office they sit to this
day, according to the archive’s internal catalogues.¹²

This chapter takes its structure and energy from the irreducible contradiction
between I fatti di Milano’s title and declared purpose, one the one hand, and on the other,
the sound recording it mobilizes towards that purpose. I begin with the hypothesis that
this contradiction, rather than signaling mere failure or lack of understanding on the part
of the record’s creators, is a way into a complex history of listening, and beyond that into
an unusual—and, for us, highly contemporary—configuration of what we traditionally
understand to be aesthetics and politics. I take it to be hardly a coincidence that the site of
I fatti’s editing and production was not associated with one of Milan’s many activist
groups, but was within the conceptual framework and political concerns of a folk music
collective. The questions I will ask are: why is sound recording in general, and this
recording in particular, charged with the function of judicial evidence in a context so
overladen with visual proof? What roles do voice and language perform (or fail to
perform)? What kind of listening does the record engender? Ultimately, what kind of
truth (legal, political, historical) does it seek to produce?

I will proceed by examining the record—and the tension between its content
versus its form, or between the means it mobilizes and its declared purpose—via two
methodological vantage points. Following a trajectory that pans out gradually from the
individual artifact, I will first close-read the record not only in its sonic content, but also

¹² I here thank Stefano Arrighetti, director of the Istituto de Martino—archive of the
Nuovo Canzoniere—for his assistance and attempts to track down the original tapes.
Stefano is currently negotiating on behalf of the archive to try and claim back the tapes,
but Gianluca Maris—who is nearly ninety-four years old—has no recollection of them.
its production history, and its materiality as an artifact: from the grain of its case to the images and typesetting that stage, so to speak, the moment when we listen to the grooved vinyl. Secondly, I will inquire after the record’s institutional set-up—a neo-folk collective riddled with internal ideological rifts regarding the identity and adequate representation of subaltern musical cultures—to expose fundamental anxieties about the politics of representation of speech and voice. At play here will be a constant oscillation between an imagined originary presence—the phenomenological premise of the initial unfolding of an event before the senses—and the logic behind the representation of that same event at a later stage. Derrida—whose critique of presence hinged on voice—haunts this chapter throughout, as does the effort of relating the basic tenets of the deconstruction of presence to the relationship between political violence and historiography as—what Jonathan Sterne calls—audile techniques.  

3.2 Unintelligible artifact

The record comes in a shellacked crimson paper sleeve, its texture studiedly grainy, as if threaded. The title *I fatti di Milano* appears in bold, black, upper case letters at the top of the sleeve’s front, and recalls the typesetting of a sensationalist news heading. The words are underscored by an image occupying the entire lower half of the sleeve. The photograph of a bearded male face (artwork by Paolo Baratella, although the record sleeve does not specify that the image is a self-portrait) is printed in black ink over the

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red backdrop; it looks outwards. Eyes wide with horror, the man’s mouth is open, tensed into a scream. This image recalls the black and white, low quality photographs of newspaper reports; indeed it is while looking at this male face that the minute grains of the sleeve paper make sense under one’s fingertips: they are the approximate size of pixels, as if to add a tangible dimension to a particular form of visual mediation, the camera’s eye turned into a threaded screen.

![Figure 3.1: I fatti di Milano, LP cover](image)

The attention to sensuous detail seems at odds with the newspaper aesthetic; indeed, a closer look reveals a constellation of striking minutiae. The male face is
presented as a series of three identical photograms splayed across the cover left-to-right, at varying intervals and slightly overlapped. They could even be stills from a film, with the reference to cinema striking contemporary handlers of the record as pointed: rumors of a lost video recording of the demonstration made by the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (whose footage allegedly incriminated the police) were (and still are) common among the left’s reports of Annarumma’s death. As juxtaposed prints of the same photograph, the image dramatizes tampering with news images: it seems to recall, for instance, Andy Warhol’s silk-screen print series of news photographs—also done on a primary color background—*Electric Chair* (1962), as well as *Car Crash* (1963). As with Warhol, the chosen image hints at the imminence or even unfolding of violent action: the photographed face is stricken with horror; the electric chair, enthroned in an empty room, silently awaits the next execution; the impacted car’s metal curls before our eyes. And as with Warhol, too, the image is both exploited for effect and subjected to an irreverent artistic treatment. Sensationalist images (in Warhol’s case, borrowed from news headings) are serialized and filtered through primary colors: a reminder that a moment-defining public affair, much like Campbell’s tomato soup, is permeated by garish marketing and mass manufacture.

It is difficult to know how to approach the evidence so earnestly promised once we listen to the record. Once the needle is put to the record, we hear a slow, gentle fade-in from silence to the sound of a distant, large crowd chanting; words are impossible to

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make out, but the march rhythm and strain of loud, rhythmic vocal delivery comes across.\textsuperscript{15} After eight seconds a voice begins speaking. It’s Gianni Bosio, speech clear and well-enunciated, its measured tone (in neat distinction with the protesters we can still hear marching behind him) tinged with a Lombard accent as he hesitatingly informs us that:

La mattina del 19... novembre 1969... parte, eh... il giorno dello sciopero generale... parte probabilmente il corteo dei gruppi minoritari... dall’università.\textsuperscript{16}

The morning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} November 1969... there sets off, er... on the day of the national strike... there sets off what may be the cortege of the minority groups [i.e. the extra-parliamentary left-wing organizations]... from the university...

In the thirty seconds that follow, Bosio silently walks away from the chanting demonstrators (we hear the click of his shoes on the pavement) towards a group singing the “Bandiera rossa,” a Communist protest song. There is then a fade-out into the end of the track at 1’33”. What is odd about this opening is how untypical it is from the rest of the record: never again will Bosio provide live commentary on the recording (even though it is safe to assume that he kept the commentaries up during the rest of the field session, if only as a way of labeling material). Never again will we be presented with raw sound bites before we are given instructions as to what we are hearing—or indeed should be listening to. The start of the next track is heralded by a post-produced caption by Bosio that drily lists the location and emphasizes the presence of recording technology—

\textsuperscript{15} The fade-in, along with the more obviously aestheticized aspects of the LP’s cover, might be heard as an unexpected cosmetic indulgence for a record meant to serve as evidence.\textsuperscript{16} I fatti di Milano, side A, 0’08-0’26.”
that most “reliable” of ears: “davanti al Lirico, con l’apparecchio numero uno” (in front of the Teatro Lirico, with recording device no. 1); Silvio Ruggeri, Bosio’s colleague, was presumably recording simultaneously with a second device.

The opening of the recording is not especially striking per se: having commentary after a brief initial sound bite was a trope of Italian radio documentaries of the period, a way of drawing the listener in. Yet what is interesting here is the subsequent wholesale abandonment of live commentary in favor of post-produced captions, an obvious sacrifice of documentary credibility. We may now be less inclined to trust that the announced location and time match those of the recorded excerpts. Still, the decision is striking in that it betrays a privileging of vocal architecture over other, perhaps more straightforward, matters: Bosio’s initially uncertain tone (the use of “probably”; his constant hesitations) might be considered inappropriate for a record to be presented as evidence. Yet the murmurs of the crowd underpinning Bosio’s voice, vague and indecipherable as they may be, endow the recording with an unmistakable “reality effect”—the material, non-signifying excess of a live event. In order for the record to be evidence, however, one would have to hear this non-signifying excess as an unequivocal sign of a particular event. The excess must be exorcised out of the crowd’s voice—a voice crowded with signification to the point of saturation—through the sheer authority of the captions. Moreover, the authority must be vocal, inoculating the excess of the crowded voice with logos: the male scholar’s voice sanitized by the soundproof studio.

17 I am referring to Roland Barthes’ famous phrase, coined in relation to the way French naturalist prose is overladen with material details and minutiae whose only role, Barthes argues, is to lend to the places of narration the effect of being “real.” See Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in The Rustle of Language (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 141-148.
Late-nineteenth century crowd theorists—Gustave Le Bon, Cesare Lombroso, Scipio Sighele—had long ago intuited that a crowd tended to fall short of intelligible utterance, and thus of clear political purpose and accountability. To them, such unintelligibility was the symptom of a lapse into “barbarian” behavior, a mode in which individuals no longer held themselves accountable. Yet Bosio’s position towards this crowd is more ambivalent: he probably celebrated, and perhaps wished to inflate, its demonstration of political power. Like any good Marxist, he would have seen in a mass protest an event of capital significance, something whose sonic and vocal excess was, quite literally, music to his ears.

And yet he also wished to protect the demonstrators from attack by the police force, to inoculate the crowd’s sound with enough logos to prove their political intent. The contradictory structure of the recorded events of 1969 is instead much closer to Agamben’s analysis of the relation of voice to state power than to turn-of-the-last-century social diagnoses. It is no coincidence that Agamben began his philosophical work on the voice at the close of the anni di piombo. Indeed, this 1969 crowd’s aural and political life is very close to that of Agamben’s notorious homo sacer: simultaneously immune from state power (it can neither be tried, nor formally punished, nor sacrificed) and vulnerable to it (anyone may harm it or kill it without suffering consequences). The voice of a crowd

18 See Gustave Le Bon, *La Psychologie des foules* (1895); Cesare Lombroso’s remarks on crowds are to be found in his books on the etiology of crime, especially *L’uomo deliquente* (1876), which in turn influenced Scipio Sighele’s more overt reflections on the relationship of community and crime in *La folla deliquente* (1891) and *La delinquenza settaria* (1897). Gavin Williams’ essay on the relationship of language to crowd in the Milanese futurist movement elucidates the relevance of this strain of fin-de-siècle sociology to twentieth-century modernist conceptions of noise. See his “A Voice in the Crowd: Futurism and the Politics of Noise,” *19th-Century Music* 37/2 (Fall 2013): 113-129.
can easily be heard as that of a pack of unruly animals that needs to be disciplined or
even killed; mass arrest at a demonstration, although technically unlawful, is easily
carried out; but to bring a mob to court is impossible. By the same token, a crowd cannot
admit its own guilt, or protest its own innocence; its voice falls outside bounds of the law.
The crowd’s voice is always a signifying entity, but its meaning is—for better or for
worse—both powerfully immune and helplessly vulnerable to State policing.19

It’s worth pondering whether Bosio had instinctively known this as he edited the
record. There is a palpable nervous compulsion behind the insistent application of post-
produced captions (one every three minutes on average, as previously mentioned). The
surest giveaway of an ambivalence over the sonic content is, however, the record’s cover,
whose aestheticized layout and images seem not only deliberately to clash with Bosio’s
documentary conceit, but whose precise visual context seems geared towards the
introduction of flaws, moments of rupture in the process of representation.

From a listener’s point of view, the cover image’s most striking detail is that its
powerful sonic implication—it is, first and foremost, the image of a scream—corresponds
to an evident, theatrical/visual flaw. The male’s gaping mouth reveals an obstruction, an
object blocking full view to his tongue, teeth, and throat. Yet the image’s low quality
makes it impossible to determine quite what the obstruction is. Is it a demonstrator’s
whistle? A mouth-guard? Or is the vagueness a deliberate quality of the image, or indeed
a printing defect owned as deliberate artifice? Once noticed, this detail becomes a
pervasive focal point, forcing the eye towards the very thing that the photographer, or the

19 See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-
photograph, or this particular print of the photograph (the chink in the mediation chain is impossible to place with precision) both presents and masks.

Roland Barthes might provide us with a term for the affect of the image on the cover: the punctum, a term he famously coined in Camera Lucida (1980) with regard to a particular effect allowed by the photographic medium. Literally “a puncture” in the photographer’s intentional portrayal of a certain visual reality, the punctum is a detail that does not make sense within the image’s architecture, impossible to pin on the photographer’s intention, which produces an excess that draws the viewer into the photograph, demanding its interpretation over and over again:

Certain details may “prick” me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally. […] The detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so: it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful; it does not necessarily attest to the photographer’s art; it says only that the photographer was there, or else, more simply, that he could not not photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object.20

This definition almost works for I fatti di Milano’s cover. I say “almost” because the detail of the obstructed mouth gains traction not so much from its work as material excess in an otherwise realistic portrayal of reality, but from its potential origin as a genuine malfunction—a failure—in the process of technological mediation. We simply cannot know whether the reason for the mouth’s indecipherability lies in the subject of the photograph or in the development and printing of the image. And it is the spectacular

flaunting of this limit—this impossibility of discernment—that seems to be the ultimate purpose of Baratella’s image. Neither admirable aesthetic artifice nor technical malfunction, the man’s obstructed mouth is an undecipherable material excrescence, at once attracting and resisting our gaze.

It is, of course, no coincidence that the punctum here attaches to the primal image—the gaping mouth—of the voice. It is a punctum whose negative aura spills into sound: we might even think of the obstructed mouth as the staged gateway (and barrier) for the LP’s sonic content. What, one wonders, does such a mouth sound like? This is hardly a traditional version of the “silenced” vox populi imagery—a face with a gagged mouth, or a mouth covered by a hand—; it is not a conventional metaphor of censorship of oppression. What we are witnessing is not mere “silencing,” a clear enforcement of power. It is much worse: a sound whose semiotics—political semiotics—are truly opaque. In front of the mouth is both an instrument and something of an obstruction—a version of the famous lock that Mozart and Schikaneder put on Papageno’s mouth. It is both a technological reproduction of a visual reality—a photograph and a print of a photograph—and the result of a malfunction in that same technology.21

21 It is worth noting that Barthes makes his first example of the distinction between studium (a general cultural interest in a photograph’s subject matter) and punctum by singling out one among many photographs from a political reportage of a bloody revolt in Nicaragua. It seems that for Barthes, photographs of events such as riots and demonstrations are very often a vehicle for studium, in that they are more or less direct representations of a political-ethical situation with obvious interest to a reader but devoid of representational finesse or self-reflexivity. See Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 25: “My rule [regarding the distinction between studium and punctum] applied all the more closely in that other pictures from the same reportage were less interesting to me; they were fine shots, they expressed the dignity and horror of rebellion, but in my eyes they bore no mark or sign: their homogeneity remained cultural: they were scenes, rather à la Greuze, had it not been for the harshness of the subject.”
underscoring the bold title of the record (“the events of Milan”), suggests a disquieting reading of the word “fatti”: evidence that is not—as Bosio’s captions seem to suggest—to be phatically coaxed against the grain of an unintelligible sonic trace, but instead coextensive with rupture, with malfunction, with the unintelligible.22

We have reason to believe that the staging of rupture and malfunction is not a rhetorical move limited to the LP cover, but something that seeps into the quick succession of captions and sound bites crafted by Bosio. This is especially obvious at the moment in which we first hear police cars charging at the demonstrators. Within a record that is presented as forensic evidence, this is the key moment: it was probably during this onslaught that Annarumma lost his life. We are at 14’40”, two-thirds into Side A and about a third into the record’s overall length. We hear a few recorded voices—one of them Bosio’s, the other a non-credited male—announce the imminent arrival of the police. Soon we hear police sirens approaching. “Attacca, eh, ecco …” (“they’re attacking, ah, here we go…”), interjects Bosio, after which all we hear is an increasingly chaotic babble and the sirens growing louder and louder. We hear some noises—gunshots perhaps. A female voice beckons one Mario (possibly Mario Capanna, the leader of the [s]tudent [m]ovement) to jump (“Mario, salta su!”) to safety. The sirens get closer and louder, uncomfortably so. So loud, in fact, that the recording device ruptures into distortions and then cuts off abruptly, as if the microphone cable had been unplugged.

22 In The Emancipated Spectator (London: Verso, 2011), Jacques Rancière critiques Barthes’ punctum on the grounds of its aesthetization of a moment of presence and acritical take on photography’s work of mediation—both elements that speak to a faded interest in the political. My point—that there is a lack of negativity in Barthes’ punctum—could easily be folded into this critique.
No explanation of this interruption is given. Only some ten minutes later, in the caption prefacing another sound bite, does Bosio inform us that:

L’apparecchio numero uno, che registrava davanti al Lirico, era rimasto bloccato durante le prime cariche; riprende a registrare in questa portineria con porta a vetri posta di fronte al Lirico.

[recording device number one, which was recording in front of the Teatro Lirico, got stuck during the first police charges; it begins to record again in this lobby with a glass door facing the Teatro Lirico.]

The wording of Bosio’s explanation (“recording device number one got stuck”) is ambiguous: human agency disappears, and the recording device is described as getting stuck—a word that describes at once logistic impediment and technological malfunction—and then mysteriously unstuck, without any external intervention. As with the image on the cover, a flaw emerges in the mediation chain—producing a lack, the obscuring of sound or sight insistently brought to our attention.

Indeed, returning to the liner notes, we find that immediately after announcing “evidence” Bosio proceeds to describe the evidence provided in odd terms:

Questa verità, dai nastri, dal documento sonoro sincrono, dalla testimonianza coeva, assume dimensioni assai precise e incontrovertibili come: l’assenza dal luogo della carica della polizia dei gruppi minoritari […] l’assenza del rituale preavviso prima della carica; gli incidenti tra camionette all’inizio della aggressione alla folla non supponente e impreparata; le prime versioni dei manifestanti all’interno ancora degli scontri[.]

[And the truth, from the tapes, from the synchronous sound document, from contemporary testimony, takes the form of precise and incontestable details such as the absence of left-wing minority groups from the location of the police attacks … the absence of the customary police warning before attack; the crash between two police vans at the beginning of the attack on the unknowing and unprepared crowd; the first accounts of the demonstrators during the clashes.]
With the exception of first-hand accounts—whose content is unsurprisingly contradictory and confused in the hubbub of the riot—Bosio’s incontrovertible evidence consists of a litany of absences: whether the absence of certain groups of people, sounds or even—as is the case with the “unknowing and unprepared crowd” a collective mens rea. Proof by sound recording is thus offered as something directly opposite to visual evidence—not a lesser or failed version of such evidence, but its idiosyncratic inversion: incontrovertible proof of what is not available to the jurisdiction of the senses.

Within this complex economy of representation, it [now] seems impossible to take Bosio’s initial offering of the recording as proof as an exhaustive guide to listening. It is, however, an essential statement, the first element of a composite, foundational gesture. The gesture consists of an outstretched hand solemnly offering material evidence; yet on that same hand, something between a lack and an unintelligible object—an “absent presence,” as Derrida might term it—lies proudly displayed as forensic proof. We seem to be faced with a work of representation that offers unintelligibility and obscurity not as the opposite of, but rather as the essence of, historical and political evidence.

3.3 Sonic anxieties: the quest for urban folk

The puzzling effect of Ifatti di Milano stems not only from the overwhelming tension between its political and aesthetic registers, but also from the absence of univocal authorial intention—be this intention documentary, forensic-legalistic, or artistic—that emerges once we examine its multiple visual, literary, and sonic traces. Some of this confusion might be ascribed, pragmatically, to aspects of the record’s production. For
instance, visual aspects of the LP’s packaging were often outsourced to volunteer activists—artists and typesetters who worked in relative independence of the creators of any given sound recording. For instance, the cover image of I fatti di Milano was not made ad-hoc for the record’s release, but rather lent by Baratella, who, together with a dozen other local artists, worked with Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano (hereafter referred to as NCI) and other local left-wing organizations as an illustrator and maker of murals and banners. Nino Crociani, who authored an illustration included in the internal notes, had offered a drawing he made eight years prior, inspired by the Algerian War of 1961. Thus, the record’s complex visual aspect is at least in part a result of a choral effort in the production of the artifact.

And yet it is impossible to dismiss this internal tension as a matter of genesis versus assemblage. If Bosio himself edited the whole LP, as his captions suggest, then the inclusion of that moment—so ungainly for documentary purposes—in which the microphone comes unplugged in medias res is not an accident or a matter of multiple authorship. It is possible that Bosio’s thoughts on the LP evolved as he edited it—hastily, over what was sure to have been a hectic December for the collective and left-wing activism in Milan in general—into its final form. Indeed, we can trace this genuine ambivalence down to the moment of origin of the artifact: the live recording of the demonstration. The only account we have of the genesis of I fatti comes from Sandro Portelli, one of Bosio’s collaborators on later “sound archive” records. Portelli, who was to become the Italian deacon of oral history, had not worked on I fatti di Milano directly,

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23 Personal interview with the artist, Milan, 24 June 2014.
but must have discussed it with Bosio at length. On one occasion, he recalls the circumstances of the record’s making in some detail:

[La]’invisibilità del folklore urbano faceva sì che lo cercassimo dappertutto, registrando e archiviando tutto ciò su cui potevamo mettere le mani. Ricordo un nastro, che esiste ancora oggi negli archivi dell’Istituto de Martino, in cui qualcuno era sceso all’angolo della strada e aveva aperto il microfono; come a dire, non sappiamo ancora cosa cercare in città, perciò cominciamo ad ascoltare, raccogliamone i suoni, poi vedremo di capire che consa sono e che senso hanno. In quel momento era impossibile, e forse anche sbagliato, distinguere fra rumori, suoni, parole, discorso, forma. Usavamo il microfono come la ‘candid camera’: Gianni Bosio registrò gli scontri in cui morì a Milano l’agente Annarumma (i nastri provavano che non erano stati i dimostranti, ma il tribunale rifiutò di ascoltarli), e ne fece un disco di rumori, sirene, frammenti di conversazioni e stridori di freni, che naturalmente nessuno comprò.

The invisibility of urban folk meant that we were looking for it everywhere, recording and archiving anything we could lay our hands on. I remember a tape, which still exists today in the archives of the Istituto de Martino, in which someone had gone down to a street corner and switched on the microphone, as if to say “we don’t yet know what to look for in the city, so let’s just begin by listening, let’s collect the sounds, and we will later try to understand what they are and if they make sense.” At that time it was impossible, and perhaps even wrong to distinguish between noises, sounds, words, language, and form. We used the microphone as one does a “candid camera”: in Milan, Gianni Bosio recorded the clashes in which agent Annarumma had died (the tapes proved that it had not been the demonstrators’ fault, but the law courts refused to listen to them) and made of it a recording of noises, sirens, fragments of conversation and the screeching of brakes; naturally, no-one bought it.24

Three things are especially striking about this quote: firstly, the expression “urban folklore,” a strikingly oxymoronic phenomenon whose primary attribute is unavailability to sight—a property that lends sound a rare primacy over sight as a tool of

24 Alessandro Portelli, quoted in Cesare Bermani, Una storia cantata (Milan: Editoriale Jaca Book SpA, 1997), 140. Originally published as “Intervistare il movimento: il ’68 e la storia orale,” in I giorni cantati, No. 10-11 (September 1989), 28-29. Bermani’s Una storia cantata is an invaluable and formidably articulate account of the NCI, often shaped in the form of a lively dialogue among a rich set of contemporary primary accounts.
anthropological evidence. Yet this focus on sound is hardly straightforward; the particles of “urban folk” that are audible remain mostly unintelligible. Portelli comes closest to articulating the complexity of I fatti when he recalls the suspended aural epistemology typical of the NCI’s work of that period, the inability to distinguish “noises, sounds, words, language, and form.” Even more striking is that Portelli characterizes this state of indiscernibility not only as a lack, a failure, but also as something of an active moral stance (“it was impossible, and perhaps even wrong”) on behalf of those handling the microphone.

Portelli’s dictum here—that it was perhaps wrong to parse sounds out—is especially telling if we consider that I fatti di Milano is the only record in the NCI’s output in which this suspension, this overwhelming unintelligibility, really holds true. Portelli is not, that is, describing a “school of thought” within the NCI, but a crucial, fleeting moment in its political and intellectual existence during the late 1960s, a moment of which I fatti is a unique embodiment. The NCI had opened its doors in 1962 as an institution essentially devoted to the documentation and diffusion of traditional musical cultures over the peninsula; its activity included a small record label (the previously mentioned “I dischi del sole”), a weekly magazine—also under the name of Nuovo Canzoniere—and some intense theatrical activity that resulted in high-profile, controversial performances such as the theater show Bella Ciao, commissioned by Giancarlo Menotti for the Spoleto Festival in 1964.25 As the 1960s progressed, and with

25 A telling detail for what follows is the reminiscence of Giovanna Marini (one of the NCI’s musicians) of the wild arguments between Leydi and Bosio days before the performance of Bella Ciao: “ho ricordato tutto […] Gianni Bosio che discute con Roberto Leydi, seduti al bar a Spoleto davanti al teatro durante le nostre prove, in modo
the increasing pressure of political unrest leading up to the autumn of 1969, the collective fell prey to a series of dramatic internal rifts and consequent fragmentation of activities.

Arguably the most high profile of these rifts was between Gianni Bosio (among others) and Roberto Leydi, one of the most famous Italian ethnomusicologists. The subject of the controversy was the relationship of the neo-folk collective to the contemporary city that hosted it. I have already mentioned that I fatti di Milano was one of only two recordings made by the collective about the NCI’s home city. Indeed this striking dearth of self-reflexivity speaks eloquently of internal tensions in the collective’s political and aesthetic agenda. For the first five years of its activity, the collective’s output revolved around two main types of musical findings: traditional songs from rural parts of the peninsula “harvested” by ethnomusicologists; and workers’ songs from the industrial north (Milan and Turin especially) whose literary trail, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, was significant. Bosio, with a background in operaismo, the championing of urban working-class culture, would grow to be particularly scathing of the collective’s focus on the rural, a trait he referred to as “marxismo di campagna” (countryside Marxism).

Still, it is significant that until 1969 he, too, could only take the city into consideration from the vantage point of the previous century’s musical literature.

accesissimo, e io li ascolto a bocca aperta, ‘stanno litigando,’ penso ‘Oddio non si farà più lo spettacolo.’"

26 The term, and a critique of, “marxismo di campagna” can be found in Gianni Bosio, “Uomo folklorico/uomo storico (relazione sull’attività dell’Istituto Ernesto de Martino, al luglio 1969,” quoted in Cesare Bermani, Una storia cantata, 130. Bosio’s essay, whose original circulation was internal to the Istituto de Martino, was eventually published in the collection L’intellettuale rovesciato: interventi e ricerche sulla emergenza d’interesse verso le forme di espressione e di organizzazione “spontanee” nel mondo popolare e proletario (Milan: Edizioni Bella Ciao, 1975, rept. by Milan: Jaca Books, 1998).
The musical activities of contemporary Milan—and particularly the commercial music transmitted by the ever-expanding networks of radio and TV—were considered by all NCI members to be ideologically compromised. The belief of both Leydi, Bosio, and all those involved with the NCI was that the working class—the heirs of the rural subaltern classes—had been duped through TV and radio into accepting the social norms and forms of middle-class behavior, a phenomenon that broadly paralleled the emergence of alienated labor within the factory. Losing control of the means of production in the workplace was, to them, tantamount to losing control over the means of cultural production in their sensorial everyday life. Commercial music of any kind was the aural equivalent to this double process of aesthetic and political trickery, a musical trickery that NCI classified under the derogatory Gramscian category of “cosmopolitanism.” Because mass media and labor alienation was seemingly all-encompassing, most music in the city was also irretrievably contaminated. Thus for instance, Giovanna Marini, a musician and active member of the NCI, would remember that she had willingly ignored the Beatles for years in the 1960s on the grounds of their political irrelevance.27

The question that concerned both Bosio and Leydi was, then, whether and how to proselytize among the working classes they so wished to emancipate. In the early years of the NCI, theater performances were perhaps the most powerful interface between the collective and the city, and it is thus significant that the decisive incarnation of the rift

between Leydi and the rest of NCI emerged as a controversy regarding the link between musical style and matters of political representation. Once field recordings had been gathered, how should songs be adapted for the stage? Should they be transcribed, arranged for modern instruments (the guitar), stripped of thick dialectal references and adapted for the vocal delivery by urban members of the collective? Or should the original performers be invited to deliver the songs themselves? If so, how should the dialect be made intelligible to the audience? If adapted, should the songs’ words be modified so as to work as contemporary protest songs? Should new songs be instead composed imitating the style of the NCI’s field recordings?

Behind this anxiety was a fundamental disagreement about the nature of a politically authentic musical object. Leydi, who held a personal archive of recordings whose extent has only recently been systematically explored, understood language—including the dialects potentially unintelligible to Milanese audiences—to be inseparable from the vocal aspects of any song truly examined in its conditions of political, economic, ethnic, and social possibility. He had made this point already in 1961, when he wrote that,

È assai pericoloso parlare, come spesso si fa a proposito di musica spontanea, di canto, così tout-court, sottintendendo in tal modo una inesistente unità formale d’ogni espressione musicale volontaria, prodotta dall’uomo per mezzo dei suoi organi vocali. Ogni popolo offre un proprio modo di cantare e lo stile vocale non si definisce in rapporto ad un astratto concetto generale, valido per ogni epoca, ogni occasione e ogni latitudine, ma in diretto riferimento alle vicende etniche, storiche, religiose, sociali della comunità cui appartiene e al sistema fonetico del linguaggio parlato.28

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[It is very dangerous to speak—as it is often done with regard to spontaneous music—of a generalized “singing.” To speak of “singing” in general would mean erroneously to assume a formal unity among all voluntary musical expressions produced by humans by means of their vocal organs. Every people displays its own mode of singing, and vocal style is not defined according to an abstract general concept, valid for every epoch, every occasion and every latitude, but in direct relationship to the ethnic, historic, religious, and social vicissitudes of the community to which it belongs, and to the phonetic system of the spoken language.]

For Bosio, instead, authenticity was an abstract category, to be proved through praxis. Only songs sung in street protests had a genuine political life, and adaptation was a necessary step towards the renewed adoption of a repertoire unknown to urban audiences. It is easy to see how Bosio’s desire to insert the NCI into the praxis of urban protest by adapting and reshaping a recorded repertoire’s language, vocal style, and instrumentation—and to disseminate the results via recordings and itinerant theatre performances—would have offended Leydi’s sensibilities regarding the question of the relationship of singing voice to language.

Yet it is critical to remember that Leydi’s discontent was not merely—as his opponents suggested—a scholar’s philological conceit. Both Bosio and Leydi were intensely Gramscian scholars whose interpretation of the same intellectual and political legacy led them down diverging paths. Bosio believed in Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual” whose work is inseparable from the political struggles of the urban working class, down to the minutest details of praxis. Leydi’s concern with the scholarly schism between linguistic and musical practices was an equally Gramscian concern with a kind of epistemic violence in which a transcribed melody was exploited as the opposite
of—or even as the antidote to—the unruliness, multiplicity, and unintelligibility of spoken practices. In 1961 he wrote that

... Non rimane da osservare come limiti tra la pretesa “razionalità” della musica e la pretesa “irrazionalità” del linguaggio siano oltremodo incerti non appena si scenda, dai punti estremi dei due termini di confronto, a quelle manifestazioni elementari di vocalità (richiami, grida, invocazioni o formulette) che partecipano nello stesso tempo della lingua parlata e della musica. La logica e l’esperienza ci dimostrano chiaramente come il passaggio di questi elementi semplici e in un certo senso ibridi ai grandi fatti consapevoli e razionali della produzione musicale avvenga per minimi gradi, in modo tale da escludere ogni possibilità di ragionevole distinzione, oltre convenzione o l’arbitrio.  

[We can’t but observe how the line separating the supposed “rationality” of music from the supposed “irrationality” of language becomes extremely blurred as soon as we descend, from the extremities of the two terms of comparison, to those elementary manifestations of vocality (shout-outs, cries, invocations, or formulas) that belong at once to spoken language and to music. Logic and experience show us clearly that the passage from these simple and somehow hybrid elements to the grand, self-conscious features of musical production takes place by infinitesimal degrees. Therefore, there can be no possible reasonable distinction between these two stages beyond mere convention and arbitrariness.]

The classification of vocal phenomena as either song or speech becomes for Leydi an enforcement of politically restrictive categories; unintelligibility is, in this respect, a form of resistance immanent to the sound materials gathered by the ethnomusicologist. Bosio, on the other hand, was concerned primarily with field recording’s potential as memorable, repeatable and chant-able political hymns; unintelligibility had, for him, no real political purpose. Leydi’s ideal intellectual practice was the archive, as much as theater and protest song was Bosio’s.

29 See Ibid., 89.
The final break came in 1966, when Leydi, who had been working as consultant for a theater performance guest-directed by Dario Fo (the show *Ci ragiono e canto*, whose title translates to “I think about it and sing”), became so disillusioned with Fo’s privileging of theatrical efficacy over accurate sonic and linguistic representation that he abandoned the collaboration and resigned from the NCI altogether.30

This internal rift, however, pervaded the NCI’s internal structure far beyond the Bosio-Leydi affair. It may be witnessed in 1967, when the NCI opened its archive, the Istituto Ernesto De Martino (the only part of the NCI that has remained active to this day). In 1973, Franco Coggiola would write of the archive in a way that spoke subtly about the moment of self-reflection that its opening signified for the NCI:

Fin dalle origini le finalità dell’Istituto sono state quelle di collaborare alla presa di coscienza della funzione che il rinnovato interesse per il mondo popolare poteva assolvere nel quadro della nostra società […] di razionalizzare il materiale raccolto e di rimetterlo in circolazione perché potesse diventare stimolo a nuove forme di cultura contemporanea.31

[Since the beginning, the aim of the Institute was to collaborate in raising awareness of the role that the renewed interest in the folkloric [popolare] world could take on within the framework of our society … to rationalize the collected material and to put it back into circulation so that it might provide a stimulus towards new forms of contemporary culture.]

30 It is important that, as Bermani reports, members of the NCI (himself included) thought of Fo’s work after *Ci ragiono e canto* as appropriating aspects of their own theatre shows while giving them no due credit. Indeed, Bermani goes so far as to accuse Fo of alienating the NCI from their main source of mainstream political prestige and financial support, the PCI (the Italian Communist Party). See Bermani, *Una storia cantata*, 124-125.
The convoluted phrasing of Coggiola’s mission statement—a collaboration towards … an awareness of the role of … an interest—says much about the move away from activism. Field recordings could now be released by the archive—accompanied, in all cases except in that of *I fatti*, by transcriptions of verbal content—as documentation. Indeed, a great number of the records released by the Istituto De Martino, including *I fatti*, were labeled “strumenti di lavoro”—tools for work. Through the institution of an internal archive releasing its own documentary discography, matters of linguistic and musical representation could be, if not resolved, then at least circumscribed and indefinitely postponed—archived indeed. The opening of an archive in the very year of Leydi’s departure also signals something subtler, more disruptive: the inoculation of the NCI’s project with/against their chief detractor (and erstwhile leading member)’s critique. The institution of the archive here serves both as a means of acknowledging—through the very institution of the archive and the acknowledgement of the materials to be collected therein—a traumatic event in the history of the institution (Leydi’s departure from the collective), and as a way of storing it as a form of external memory that allowed the members of the collective to forget the ideological rift that had torn through the NCI. This is the ambiguity at the heart of Derrida’s understanding of the archive as a place where the past is both transparently stored and also forgotten, repressed.32

This process of internal absorption of the intellectual and political rupture can be understood not only as the embracing of the archive as part of the NCI’s core activities of linguistically unparsed field recordings, but as a willful pairing, particularly on Bosio’s

part, of that archival impulse with contemporary research on the city, as a new form of
documentary praxis. This praxis is, of course, political through and through. In 1966
Bosio wrote of “the interest, preeminent within the NCI, for urban research and for the
reconfiguration of our movement into a more suitable organization: we hope this
organization will be the Istituto Ernesto De Martino.”33 To pair the practice of field
research with the contemporary city—in Italy of the late 1960s—meant overcoming
hardened dichotomies that described folk music as the exclusive property of a
disappearing countryside. Indeed, this is precisely what Sandro Portelli is talking about
when he wields, in relation to I fatti, the apparently oxymoronic category of “urban folk.”

As the conflict inherent in Portelli’s nomenclature implies, the search terms for
this turn towards the city embodied a suspended contradiction, a kernel of tension. The
city’s folklore was a necessary category for the NCI’s intellectual survival, and yet it was
also a phenomenon primarily defined by what it was not and could not be—firstly, of
course, the abhorred commercial music diffused through the mass communication media;
but secondly, traditional “songs” harvested in the countryside. “Urban folk,” in other
words, could only be demonstrated to exist by virtue of what it was not, what it would not
sound like. Indeed, beyond its negative determination, urban folk as a category is
something of a provocation to deconstruction, a glitch by which a long-held, post-
enlightenment dichotomy of city and countryside (“urban” and “folk”) is spun into a
single oxymoronic term tearing at the seams.34 The concern with an originary music (so

33 Bosio quoted in Bermani, Una storia cantata, 129.
34 On the post-enlightenment ideology of the dichotomy between city and countryside,
see Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1975).
originary as to require an undiscriminating ear for all sound), authentic and unspoiled and yet at the same time, fully representative of a historically determinate industrial proletariat, has the effect of turning “urban folk” into something that cannot exist as a presence: a sound, a recognizable aural experience of authenticity. Instead, its authenticity consists precisely in its withdrawing from presence, in its aural manifestation as a rupture of sense, as disturbance that eschews categorization—what Derrida would term the trace, or, better still for our purposes, the “presence of an absence.”

The only thing that could provide a material trace of this elusive phenomenon was the undiscerning mechanical ear of a recording device. And in 1966, Bosio would publish “Elogio del magnetofono” (In praise of the magnetophone), arguably his most famous essay to date. The essay opens with unsurprising remarks regarding the magnetophone’s ability to capture an unmediated “reality,” but grows more convoluted as it gets closer to the definition of this reality.\[35\] By the middle of the essay, Bosio seems to reject the notion that urban folk might have anything to do with songs, or perhaps even music, moving towards a murkier definition of its sonic properties:

La ricerca sulla realtà urbana contemporanea è però cosa dissimile dalla ricerca tradizionale. Cercare […] i suoni della città, o peggio ancora, forme di espressività che si apparentano a quelle del mondo contadino (malavita, canzoni d’osteria, e pochi eccetera), è peggio che lavorare a mercede per arricchire. La campagna, dissolta, può servire a far capire la città; ma la città fa giustizia della campagna. Si tratta di cogliere dentro o tra le pieghe, sopra o al limite il mondo dell’uomo derivato dal profitto e da qui ritornare a ciò che determina questo mondo.\[36\]


\[36\] Bosio, “Elogio del magnetofono,” 165.
[Research on contemporary urban reality is, however, unlike traditional research. To search for the sounds of the city or, worse still, for forms of expression akin to those of the peasant world (petty criminals, tavern songs, and little else) is as productive as working by commission in order to get rich. The countryside—by virtue of its disappearance—may help one understand the city; but the city puts the countryside to death. One must work towards finding—inside, or between the folds, above or at the very boundary—the world of a man who is derived by financial profit. From there we can retrace the conditions that define this world.]

With the aid of a recording device pointed haphazardly, Bosio strives to find something akin to the physical, immediate sonic emanation of what he deemed the elusive political reality of the city. But as he inches towards the definition of this anthropological reality, the field of his search—the city—become bent, folded, full of mysterious threshold areas hiding the object of the ethnologist’s desire. The crumbling dichotomies against which Bosio is working here—what we might term the suspended sonic epistemology behind the turn towards the city—actively shape the object of his listening, point at its location and hide it at once. Now his “man derived by financial profit” almost sounds like the aural (and rather dystopian) version of the “honest man” that forever escaped the halo of Diogenes’ lamp. Both Diogenes’ philosophical stunt and Bosio’s search seem to point towards a performed absence: something powerfully conjured up to the senses by a breathless, failed search. It was under the star of this contradictory bind—the sonic

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37 Listening is of course a notorious locus for the blurring between subject and object. Bodio comes closest to admitting the relationship between his suspended aural epistemology and the confusing results of his urban research in a posthumous annotation to “Elogio del magnetofono,” dating from August 1967 and included in the version of the essay published in L’intellettuale rovesciato. See 167: “Aggiungere all’ Elogio del magnetofono le considerazioni sul marxismo delle campagne come inadatto alla ricerca urbana. La difficoltà della ricerca nella attuale città potrebbe essere in relazione al fatto che noi adoperiamo uno strumento d’indagine grezzo, come il marxismo delle campagne, in una realtà che è stravolta.”
recording of a conjured-up absence—that the NCI intersected with the Milanese urban violence of the late 60s.

3.4 The absent “fatti”: between aesthetics and politics

To put it another way, *I fatti di Milano* folds together, in its genesis, structure, and placement within the history of both the NCI and Milan, a political and aesthetic quest. The search for audible proof of the demonstrators’ innocence is also, at the same time, the search for a recorded sonic event—if you will, an imaginary, inaudible music—suitable to the NCI’s shifting ideology. To say that the political quest for proof and aesthetic quest for “urban folk” are folded together is perhaps to place insufficient emphasis on their profound mutual entwinement. It would be better to say that both “proof” and “urban folk” are but versions of the same fundamental desire, a desire for a faithful—as well as politically suitable—representation of events. In order to delve deeper into the parallel role of “proof” and “urban folk” and the highly contemporary anxiety about representation they embody in *I fatti*, let me take each term separately one final time.

The distrust of the NCI’s musical adaptations of field recordings initially expressed by Leydi, but ultimately appropriated by Bosio in his turn toward urban sonic ethnography, points precisely to the distrust of the work of representation implied in musical transcription and even composition. This turn away from musical composition—and its unreliable mode of representation of an imaginary sonic reality—is a product of the possibilities provided by sound recording technology. It was precisely the possibility
of swapping musical representation for a supposedly less mediated “reproduction” of sounds that inspired the turn towards “urban folk.”

And it is telling that a shadow of this same conceit still haunts our own current turn towards “sound studies,” so much so that one of the leading thinkers of this turn—Jonathan Sterne—devoted a key section of his seminal book *The Audible Past* to dispelling the idea that the ontology of recorded sound should be predicated on the idea of copy (disembodied recording) versus original (embodied sonic reality), an idea whose most famous and most poetic nomenclature is Murray Schaeffer’s term “schizophonia.” Sterne writes:

> “Original” sounds are as much a product of the medium as are copies—reproduced sounds are not simply mediated versions of unmediated original sounds. Sound reproduction is a social process. The possibility of reproduction precedes the fact.\(^{38}\)

The most convincing analysis of *I fatti* takes its cue from Sterne’s point here: the notion of an elusive, *original* sonic reality to be captured by the itinerant ethnologist armed with magnetophone is a product of the emphasis on originals and copies that accompanied the rise of sound reproduction. Reproduction, that is, is the most social of processes, a politically and historically determinate representation.

In the case of *I fatti* the turn towards sound did not provide any relief for Bosio’s anxiety about the politics of representation. From the vantage point of contemporary sound scholarship, his way of approaching the city—with a microphone held aloft, minimal interactions with people, and portable, lo-fi technology even by late 1960s’ standards—is woefully outdated. *I fatti* was underpinned by a faith in the objectivity of

the recorded sound that is antithetical to the discipline of sound studies as it is configured today.\textsuperscript{39} And yet, the record is highly unusual in that this very outdated faith in authenticity leads, paradoxically, towards a radical undoing of the notion of “original sound event.” It was precisely because Bosio believed recorded sound to be true to an original event that he took scarcely intelligible fragments, absences, gaps, and ruptures to be the very substance of the sonic event. The lo-fi, muffled, unintelligible or distorted sounds captured by those portable recorders were not taken to be faded copies of a vivid original. Instead, it was as if they’d perfectly captured the original by the very virtue of their glitches and failures. The distortions and eventual unplugging of the microphone at the key moment of the first police charge are placed—flaunted—at the heart of the record, as the culmination of its purpose. The original sound event is something that resists the microphone, that leaves a trace of something unintelligible, incomprehensible, impossible to parse and transcribe. A true Derridian trace, far from being a mere by-product of the prone-ness to failure of Bosio’s portable recorder, it is built into the core of recording technology. We may also think of it as what Friedrich Kittler called—in an expression tellingly knotted with negatives—the “body that did not cease not to write itself.”\textsuperscript{40}

To say that \textit{I fatti} embraces the unintelligible debris that lies at the heart of sound recording is, however, not saying enough. It is important to add that this acceptance was

\textsuperscript{39} I am here thinking especially of the soundscapes created by Steven Feld, in which any claim to objectivity is abandoned in favor of creative editing techniques, crafting a sonic narration of the event that is willfully presented as partial and subjective and created in active collaboration with the “inhabitants” of a particular soundscape.

not the by-product of a high-art modernist aesthetics of noise. After all, noise and semiotically dislodged sounds have repeatedly been a key aspect of twentieth-century art music: a lineage joining futurism to musique concrète, to an institution like Milan’s Studio di Fonologia, and beyond.\(^{41}\) In the case of \(I\ fatti\), the pressure of political praxis—of the desire to use sound recording technology as a mode of political activism—acted as a point of resistance to this aesthetic impulse. Despite its contents, the record was presented not as music but as supposed proof in a murder case.\(^{42}\) Portelli speaks to the record’s still oddly hybrid nature when he remarked on how the record belonged to a time when,

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\text{la fruizione dei long playing […] era estetica e non di studio, per cui il disco sui fatti di Milano ha avuto pochi acquirenti e pochi ascoltatori (io stesso credo di averlo messo sul giradischi non più di un paio di volte).}^{43}
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[the function of long playing records […] was aesthetic rather than scholarly, which is why the LP of the events in Milan had so few buyers and listeners (I myself have probably played it no more than a couple of times)].

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\(^{41}\) Those who worked at the Nuovo Canzoniere in 1969 would have been quite familiar with the Studio di Fonologia, because Luigi Nono composed a piece in collaboration with both the Studio and the NCI in 1968. The piece, entitled \(\text{Non consumiamo Marx}\) [Let us not commodify Marx] and based on tapes of demonstrations in Paris and Venice, was published as an LP in the NCI’s Dischi del Sole in 1969. Although the piece employs recorded materials very similar to \(I\ fatti\), its realm is very much that of high-art composition, however politically committed. This means, concretely, that at no point is the recording of the demonstration meant to be listened to as evidence of a concrete and perhaps violent political event. Rather, the sound itself of demonstrations is used as a largely non-semantic sonic signifier of political unrest.

\(^{42}\) Soon after it was released, Sandro Portelli guided the production of the De Martino sonic archives towards oral history, thus shifting the emphasis on transcribed, intelligible speech and interviews, and towards a more straightforward, Gramscian praxis of documenting the strife of urban poor by putting their voices, so to speak, on the record. Portelli’s essays on oral history are collected in Portelli, \(\text{Storia orale: racconto, immaginazione, dialogo}\) (Roma: Donzelli, 2007).

\(^{43}\) Sandro Portelli, personal communication with the author, 5 February 2015.
Released in a format whose previous reputation had been prevailingy aesthetic, *I fatti* seems designed to loop its listeners endlessly, mercilessly between two kinds of sensorial experiences: it is both urgent sonic proof and evident absence; useless as forensics, and yet insufficient as an artistic object.

I would venture that *I fatti di Milano*’s insistence on proof—and the suspension between political and aesthetic purpose it produces—is not only a renunciation of the comforts that can be derived from the aesthetization of political events, but also a reflection of an attitude towards law, proof, and politically responsibility typical of the *anni di piombo*, of which *I fatti* is the unmistakable product. The (impossible) quest for “proof” urged upon the listener bespeaks an historical moment in which the anxiety of representation was itself deeply intertwined with political praxis.

I might illustrate this point further through what was arguably the most powerful—and enduring—terrorist attack, which produced a lengthy, inconclusive exercise of the law: the massacre in Piazza Fontana (Milan) on 12 December 1969. While the LP was being edited, and in a location just yards away from the site of Annarumma’s death—the Banca Nazionale dell’Agricoltura in piazza Fontana, steps away from the Duomo—a bomb detonated at 4.37pm, killing 17 people and wounding 88. What has earned piazza Fontana its grim reputation as the opening act of a decade of internal political violence was not only the scale of the bloodshed, nor the high-profile location of the explosion, but the intricate and ambiguous path of justice—the inconclusive search for a culprit whose elusiveness only compounded the horror. The mystery of the culprit behind the attack was spectacularly amplified by the mainstream press, with images
chosen for their aesthetic, indeed theatrical effect. Early photographic reportages on piazza Fontana in the Corriere della sera and La Repubblica played on the image of the derelict circular main hall of the bank—a panopticon-style hall whose architecture rendered the debris from the explosion a spectacular crime scene, an invitation to look for impossible clues. The image’s effect—which is not dissimilar to that of the screaming mouth of the face on I fatti’s cover—relies on its contradictory visual codes: a large, ruptured space that is curiously empty of anything to look at (there are, for instance, no bodies on the ground in these photos) but the dramatic splaying of the space itself. Another way to look at this same phenomenon would be through Susan Buck-Morss’ concept—via Benjamin—of “anaesthetics,” the training of the modern sensorium to close itself off to stimuli by flooding it with overwhelming information. The ultimate result, Buck-Morss argues, is a tripartite structure of agent-matter-observer in which the public of mass media is both matter and external observer, both helpless and all knowing, but deprived of agency. The newspaper reader’s distanced vision of the bomb-ravaged hall—with bits of debris that must be, after all, contain fragments blown up human bodies—seems to encapsulate this division of perceptual labor, and fits into the creation of the atmosphere of Taussig’s terror as usual as a situation of anxious spectatorship in which righteous political activity feels impossible.

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Speculation—lengthy, anxious, infinitely protracted—is another feature of Taussig’s terror as usual. Political responsibility for violence can be the object of fantastic public speculation, but never resolved. Clues leading to the identity of the perpetrators of a crime, or authors of even a political gesture can be fabricated—as in the strategy, much discussed at the time, of “false flagging”—leaving all praxis at the mercy of unreliable representation. Within this atmosphere, “proof” becomes—even in the case of a just accusation—a staging, something that requires most of all a kind of aesthetic
In the case of piazza Fontana, this rush towards the production of evidence was reflected in the way artists and scholars took up the role of filling in the gaps left by legal proceedings. When Luigi Pinelli, an anarchist railway worker, inexplicably fell out of a third floor window during interrogation at a police station, Dario Fo produced a play—his most celebrated to this day—whose purpose was to reconstruct what had happened in the interrogation room: *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (Accidental Death of an Anarchist, 1970). A similar example, also related to piazza Fontana, is the work of historian Carlo Ginzburg. When Luigi Calabresi, the police officer who led the initial investigations into piazza Fontana (including the interrogation during which Pinelli died) was murdered in 1972, a single accusation made twelve years after the crime, against

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46 That the legal proceedings around the Piazza Fontana murders speak to elements of false-flagging were discerned even at the level of individual physiognomy. A taxi driver recognized Pietro Valpreda, an anarchist, as someone he had driven to the bank only minutes before the explosion. Valpreda was fully acquitted in 1979 for lack of evidence. As late as 2000, the Corriere della Sera advanced the hypothesis that a look-alike was used in order to frame him; this was suspected to be Antonio “Nino”, from the right-wing group Ordine Nuovo, who at the time was infiltrating anarchist circles, apparently at the behest of the government. See Paolo Biondani, “Sul taxi della strage il sosia di Valpreda,” *Il Corriere della Sera*, 19 June 2000, 15; available at [http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2000/giugno/19/](http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2000/giugno/19/) accessed on 5 March 2015. In a parliament hearing regarding unsolved police investigations of mass murders from the years of lead, it turned out that Sottosanti had also received money, on the afternoon of the explosion, from Pinelli, the anarchist who fell to his death during police interrogation on the night of 12 December 1969. Sottosanti was never charged and died in 2004. See “Commissione parlamentare d’inchiesta sul terrorismo in Italia e sulle cause della mancata individuazione dei responsabili delle stragi—73° resoconto stenografico della seduta di mercoledì 5 luglio 2000”, 3413; available at [www.parlamento.it](http://www.parlamento.it), accessed on 5 March 2015. The ongoing public interest in the events of Piazza Fontana—and its lack of legal resolution—is demonstrated by the 2012 film *Romanzo di una strage*, by leading Italian director Mario Tullio Giordana. The film’s proposed solution to the crime hinges on the hypothesis of a physiognomic false-flagging of Valpreda as the culprit arranged by government officials.

Lotta Continua’s Adriano Sofri, resulted in trial and imprisonment. And yet it was this trial that motivated Ginzburg to publish his famous pamphlet book *Il giudice e lo storico* (The Judge and the Historian, 1991). In this book, Ginzburg applied his skills as a historian of the legal proceedings of sixteenth-century trials for heresy and witchcraft in order to work through the evidence of the trial and ultimately argue for Sofri’s innocence, albeit to no avail.

To place *I fatti* within this constellation is not to hail it as the sonic equivalent of Ginzburg’s argumentation or Fo’s play. *I fatti* did not have the ambition, clear purpose, and—perhaps most importantly—widespread reception of either of those works, and with good reason: it offered no solution, aesthetic or legal, to the impossibility of proof. Rather, it promised a solution only to make the solution’s absence more deeply felt.

Within the NCI’s history the record is but a glitch, a slight malfunction produced by the realignment of the collective’s activities and production. But is precisely this characteristic—of its being the product of a temporary ideological malfunction in a folk music collective, or of the collapse of political and legal accountability in the face of rising urban violence—that makes it so disturbing to anyone thinking not so much of music history, but of music and its imagined ancestor, “sound,” as a mode of writing history. By setting up the aural quest for proof and the simultaneous revelation of the

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staging involved in all proof, it doubly resists the production of a truth of any kind, locking us—whether we like it or not—into listening not for, but to, absence.
Chapter 4

The Sense of Adriano Celentano’s *Prisencolinensinainciusol* (1972-1974):
Language, Southerness, and the Debt of Milanese Modernity

We call the language proper to a country
That which is so powerful
That the words taken up don’t disarrange her,
But rather she disarranges them.¹

Niccolò Machiavelli, 1524-25

4.1 Introduction

In 1972, Adriano Celentano (b. 1938), a Milanese pop singer and wholesale importer of Elvis-style rock n’ roll into the Italian hit parade by now some fifteen years into his career, released a 45rpm on whose two sides were grooved two songs: “Disc Jockey” (side B) and “Prisencolinensinainciusol” (side A) (henceforth Prisen). The latter song would go on to become a sweeping nation-wide success, and enter—alone in Celentano’s output and a rarity even in the output of Italian singers in the 1970s—the American hit parade.²

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To the American and broadly Anglophone public—and even to the American academy—the song remains familiar to this day. Key to this lingering presence is Prisen’s language: a stream of non-semantic words delivered rhythmically by Celentano and a mixed chorus in a rousing call-and-response, sung nearly at the speed of speech over a four-bar looped thumping 4/4 in E flat drums and bass, peppered by a funk-flavored horn riff. Celentano obtained the explosive, propulsive sound of the riff’s base by having his drummer and bassist play on slackened strings to add grain to the pulse, almost as if beating the voice part into existence.3

Ever since its release, and through bouts of renewed popularity across the decades, the song’s lyrics—an idiolect fashioned by Celentano for the purposes of this track—have had the effect of something like an aural Roscharch test targeted at one’s ear for language. In the forty-three years since the song’s release, the stream of nonsense has been spoken in many tongues to its listeners. Most recently, a spat of Anglophone press has brought Prisen to new notoriety on YouTube. To these commentators, Prisen offers a

3 See Adriano Celentano, “Quel mio rap senza senso,” interview for La repubblica, 23 December 2009, available at http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2009/12/23/celentano-quel-mio-rap-senza-senso.html; accessed 28 July 2015: “E come sempre accade, curavo personalmente i colori degli strumenti. Quello sul quale mi soffermai di più, fu quello della batteria. Il batterista era un tedesco, molto bravo. Gli feci allentare la pelle del tamburello in modo che il colpo sul rullante risultasse di tono più basso e più sconquassante, quasi come se il colpo si rompesse. La stessa cosa feci con la chitarra e con il resto degli strumenti. Finalmente quando tutto funzionava alla perfezione e il colpo del tedesco era perfetto come una vera e propria macchina da combattimento, (perché questa era l’impressione che mi suggeriva il brano) sovrapposi la voce.” [And as per usual, I personally took care of instrumental color. I gave special attention to the drums. My drummer was German, he was very good. I had him slacken the skin on the tambourine so that the beat on the rollers would have a lower and more explosive tone. Then I did the same thing with the guitar and with the rest of the instruments. Finally when everything was just right and the German’s beat was as perfect as a true war machine (because this is the impression I got from the piece) I put the voice on top.]
stream of Anglophone gibberish meant to represent and parody the sound of American English. If former *The New Yorker* pop music critic Sasha-Frere Jones celebrates the song’s lack of sense as a delightful exercise in linguistic exuberance, other commentators latch more tightly onto the representation of English on behalf of a non-Anglophone speaker.⁴ To them English—the most internationally spoken language in the West—is here proven to be so pervasive that even those who don’t speak it can’t help but mimic its sound. By 2009, Prisen’s video circulated on YouTube with the title “What American English Sounds Like to Foreigners,”⁵ the specificity of English now contrasted to a nondescript “foreignness” whose undertones whirr with incipient xenophobia.

This is not to say that the mimicry of English sounds is not part and parcel of Prisen; indeed, although by 1972 he sang primarily in Italian, Celentano had cut his teeth in covers of Elvis Presley and Little Richard hits, and this despite the fact that he did not—and does not, to this day—speak English. Indeed, the video-performances of this song that have been essential to its surge of popularity with Anglophone audiences show Celentano performing with a body language unmistakably cribbed from televised rock n’ roll performances—pelvic thrusts, the pairing with a blonde bombshell, stylish black and white geometries. It is no wonder that, since its return on Anglophone websites, Prisen

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⁵ The YouTube video in question can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZXcRqFmFa8&list=RDBZXCqFmFa8#t=0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZXcRqFmFa8&list=RDBZXCqFmFa8#t=0). It has been online since 17 December 2009.
has been repeatedly and very successfully subjected by Anglophone audiences to hilarious mondegreens—the mishearing of the gibberish as actual, if nonsensical, English lyrics. Even the song’s published lyrics from the 1972 Milan-published score—lyrics that don’t exactly correspond to the 1974 version of the song that would rise to fame—betray snippets of transliterated English words. The semantic goldmine provided by the song’s lyrics when heard by an English speaker can be shown quickly by interspersing the published lyrics with some of the mondegreen subtitles (in italics below) that abound online:

(parlato) Prisencolinensinainciusol
Coro: In de col men deivuan
You’re coal maze of Salem
Prisencolinensinainciusol ol rait
Prisencolinensinainciusol, all right

Uis de sein cius nau
We’re the same to choose now,
Op de sein ol uait men
Then a whole rate Mary
In de colobos dai
Used to cover boss dive
Trrr..
Ciak is e maind beghin de col
The checkers of mine we keep it cold
Bebi stei ye push yo ho
Baby, sustain yeah Blue show whoa

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6 The term “mondegreen” indicates the reordering of sung and spoken words into alternative sentences, was coined by Sylvia Wright in her essay “The death of Lady Mondegreen,” Harper’s Magazine, November 1954. Wright misheard the lyrics “They hae slain the Earl of Murray/And they laid him on the green” as “They hae slain the Earl of Murray/And the Lady Mondegreen.” The phenomenon of mondegreen is explored in Steven Connor’s essay “Earslips: Of Mihearings and Mondegreens,” (2009) available at http://stevenconnor.com/earslips.html; accessed 9 August 2015.

7 Prisencolinensinainciusol/Disc Jockey, sheet music and lyrics (Milan: Edizioni Musicali CLAN s.r.l. 1972), 29; and the subtitle from the YouTube video
Yet before we begin placing too strong an emphasis on the English words or prosody referenced in the song, it is worth remembering that Prisen’s language games were intended as a far more prismatic linguistic phenomenon that mere English parody, and that they were also not immediately intelligible—and thus popular—upon its release.\footnote{8}

The 1972 LP of Prisen—a record conceived and designed by CLAN, Celentano’s own production house, an Italian version of Sinatra’s Rat Pack—speaks to the elusiveness of the song’s language. Featuring an image of a singing Celentano from the torso up, with a half open leopard-print shirt, left hand in mid-air and right-hand clutching a mike, it carries the following explanatory caption: “Questa canzone è cantata in una lingua nuova che nessuno capirà; avrà solo un significato: AMORE universale”\footnote{9} [this song is sung in a new language no-one will understand; it will have only one meaning: universal LOVE].

Indeed, the full title of the song that runs in upper-case letters across the bottom margin of the cover bears the pronunciation-aiding accents typical of dictionary entries (PRISENCÓLINENSINÁINCIÚSOL). Also on the cover are imaginary statistics from by a “Centro Elettronico del Futuro” reporting the song as the no. 1 hit all over the world in

\footnote{Prisencolinensainciusol Lyrics revealed, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXfNuawtQAY; accessed 9 August 2015. This is currently one of three different English-subtitled videos of Prisen on YouTube.}

\footnote{8 Although Celentano recently confirmed the song’s purpose of mimicking American English when contacted by NPR’s radio series “All Things Considered” in 2012, his opinion is hardly a music critic’s gospel: he is known in Italy as a shrewd trickster figure with plenty of experience as a TV presenter, a dead-pan joker whose personality relies on giving the impression of never saying anything fully in earnest. Broadcast on NPR on 4 November 2012, 4:13 PM ET, available online at http://www.npr.org/2012/11/04/164206468/its-gibberish-but-italian-pop-song-still-means-something; accessed 28 July 2015.}

\footnote{9 Cover of Prisencolinensainciusol/Disc Jockey, 45rpm, BF 70026, Milan, Edizioni CLAN, 1972.}
1978. No mention of America or the English language is made; indeed, the hippy-ish talk of universal love and mock-futurism has little to do with the parodic intent that seems so obvious to Anglophone audiences. It is also important to note that for Celentano the casting of the song as one of universal love went hand in hand with a narrative of the song as a representation of unintelligibility. In one of the two video performances of 1974 that would bring the song to fame, he explained the song thus:

io ho capito che oggi nel mondo non ci capiamo più... proprio è difficile... non c'è dialogo ormai... è rimasto solo lo sguardo un po' afflitto... e quindi ho ritenuto opportuno fare una canzone sviluppando il tema dell'incomunicabilità.¹⁰

[I understood that in the world nowadays we don’t understand one another anymore… it is really quite difficult… there’s no longer any dialogue… all that’s left is a slightly dismayed gaze… and so I thought it would be appropriate to make a song by developing the theme of incommunicability]

Over the two years following its release, Prisen’s meaning would be painstakingly re-articulated through new contextualization, video performances and further commentary by Celentano. Within these performances, the coexistence of belonging and non-belonging, universal language and universal misunderstanding, perfect sense and irreparable linguistic malfunctions are shown to coexist through thickets of political, sonic and social signification. Herein lies the contradiction at the heart of this song and of the politics of language that, as I argue throughout this chapter, it embodies. Nonsense, in order to gain a liberating and meaningful function, has to be put in a condition to signify,

¹⁰ Transcribed from television performance of Prisencolinensinainciusol on the show Formula Due, broadcast on November 1974 on RAI 3, available as a youtube video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VsmF9m_Nt8; accessed on 28 July 2015.
all the while staying shy of exact semantics in a particular language. It is in this process that the political workings of sound—the conditions under which sound makes sense—might best be observed.

In his essay on mondegreens and “slips of the ear,” Steven Connor warns us not to celebrate too hastily the liberating power of nonsense lyrics:

The pleasure of mondegreens might seem to come from the sudden eruption of the aleatory. But, though mishearings may appear pleasingly or even subversively to sabotage sense, they are in fact in essence negentropic, which is to say, they push up the slope from random noise to the redundancy of voice, moving therefore from the direction of nonsense to sense, of nondirection to direction. They seem to represent the intolerance of pure phenomena. In this they are different from the misspeakings with which they are often associated. Seeing slips of the ear as simply the auditory complement of slips of the tongue mistakes their programmatic nature and function. Misspeakings are the disorderings of sense by nonsense; mishearings are the wrenchings of nonsense into sense.¹¹

Weighed against this pronouncement, Prisen seems to be most interesting when examined not so much as a suspension of sense—a misspeaking—but as a careful matrix for mishearings, that is, for producing sense while at the same time resisting any single semantic framework. This process is indicated by the history of the song’s consumption. Unpopular as a single in 1972, it shot up to chart-topping hit in 1974. Sense was built for Italian audiences over years of performances and re-inscription of the songs into a variety of thickly symbolic contexts, and it is on this sense that its success in Italy—a precondition for its current rediscovery by Anglophone audiences—relies. Without the re-inscriptions of meaning worked upon the song between 1972 and 1974, the widely

¹¹ Steven Connor, “Earslips: Of Mishearings and Mondegreens.”
available video performances of the song—the medium through which Prisen is most often heard nowadays—would not exist. The conditions for English speakers’ recognition of the parody element of Prisen are that song’s success and recognized meaning in its country of production, a success in which the parody of English was but one element in a symbolic network of associations that involved language, sound, and belonging. Prisen’s current popularity thus ultimately relies on the production of Italian linguistic identity in the 1970s, a production that involves both an idiosyncratic reworking of American culture and the negotiation of deep-seated racial anxieties regarding Italy’s place in Europe and the relationship of the Italian south to the north—all things for which Milan, symbol of Italy’s cosmopolitan European ambition and symbolic separation from the southern regions, provided the ideal ground.

This chapter—the last of four chronologically arranged sections spanning two decades—is the only one in the thesis to examine popular music, and focuses very intensely on the one song, Prisen, onto which it circles back, each time restaging an act of listening that carries, with each round, a new thread of political signifiers. But it is very much the historical and philosophical sibling of the others, which it folds, in many ways, back into its own structure. Celentano’s career as a performer, of which the 1950s-1970s might be seen to represent a first unified arch, before the singer’s experiments with cinema and tv presenting in the 1980s and 1990s, spans the chronological arch of my thesis. The arch is not just chronological, of course. It was in 1957, the year in which Luciano Berio and Eco began collaborating on Thema, the year of Fred K. Prieberg’s journey to the Studio di Fonologia, that Celentano rose to fame as a home-made version of 1950s American rock n’ roll. His sound became so thickly embedded in the aural
imagination of Italy’s (and especially Milan’s) belated arrival to modernity that we can imagine his music wired out into the city from the same RAI studios that hosted Berio and Maderna’s Studio di Fonologia. Celentano was also responsible for spreading—through his covers of rock n’ roll hits—something of an ear for English (an ear that processed all but semantics) which was the aural, mass-produced counterpart to Eco’s (and then Berio’s) love for Joyce’s English. And the shawm-playing barefoot figure that haunts Prieberg’s path to the Studio di Fonologia is none but the ghost of a southerness inside the modernist machine of Milan that also haunts Celentano’s complex consciousness as an American-style performer, Milanese idol, and (as we will see) Apulian immigrant. Celentano’s nonsense song, at once the excess of language and the marking of the failure to be language, belongs to the same aural prism as the protagonist in Maderna’s Hyperion, shackled to a flute that protects him from logos by leaving him at its cruelest mercy. And it was in no small part because of the success of singers like Celentano—and their glorification of American capital, cultural, and otherwise—that the intellectuals of Nuovo Canzoniere found themselves breathlessly harvesting for untouched, that is, un-listened to, sound materials in the riot-filled streets of Milan. In fact, it was their desire to radically un-hear the modernity that Celentano embodied—to be immune from it—that produced the negative energy under which fuels their brief documentary efforts and melts, as an overheated projector does with tape, the sound evidence they bring up to our ears.
4.2 Community, Identity and Language

Some of the most recent literature about Prisen has pointed out the fundamental contradiction that lies at its heart, the peculiar element that allows it to preserve interest for international audiences to this day. It is telling that one such piece of insight should come not from musicology, but from translation studies, where Prisen is briefly picked up as translation, that is, as a writing that registers the relationships between two languages. The author, David Bellos, writes,

Sung to a catchy tune, Adriano Celentano’s “Prisenconsinensinainciusol, ol rait” is witty and a surprising simulation of what English sounds like—without being in English at all. However, the translation of its Anglo-gibberish in textual form represents English-soundingness only when it is vocalized (aloud, or in your head) according to Italian script. Prisenconsinensinainciusol […] is a specifically Italian fiction of the foreign.¹²

Bellos’ statement is complex and partly troubling—given the very limited role voice and music play in his notion of text and translation. Telling about this otherwise quite cursory assessment is the instant parting of the voice from the text. The transcription/translation of the song’s words is a neutral linguistic script to be “vocalized” in order to attain the effect of the recorded original; this is an odd statement when we consider that Prisen’s lyrics have been variously translated into text both as a series of random English words and as a more or less Italian phonetic transcription (completely nonsensical). The multiplicity of transcription and the inherent phonetic multiplicity the song allows, or

even demands, give the lie to the possibility of anything akin to a neutral textual
dimension. If anything, Prisen gives the lie to the possibility of separating “vocalization”
and writing. And yet this is not to say that writing—the act of making legible,
memorable, and repeatable a snippet of vocal sound—is not crucial to the song. On the
contrary, it is an all-encompassing gesture. To think Prisen in terms of its lyrics alone
would mean to discount the vocal and recording technologies—technologies that are
proper to musical production—that contribute to the song’s fixation into memories
human and mechanical. The difficulty with Prisen is not so much that it presents us with
a voice that eschews writing, but rather that it is a voice that is already the product of
writing. Its musical constitution—its rhythm, its scoring, the vocal techniques used
therein and production values—make legible and memorable a stream of otherwise
indistinguishable gibberish.

But before we delve further into detail, I should note that Bellos ends his brief
mention of the song with an apparently oxymoronic statement: “a specifically Italian
fiction of the foreign.” The contradiction lies in the fact that it applies national identity
(Italian-ness) to a concept—foreignness—that is the opposite of identity and belonging.
An Italian fiction of the foreign would represent Italian identity not through traits
perceived to be common to the imagined community of Italian, but through the
representation of something that defines the community from the outside, its limits, that
which it excludes and in which, in turn, it lacks. Hillel Schwarz encapsulates this
powerfully in his own brief nod to Prisen, which is also the final paragraph of his essay
“Fifth Element: For a Study of Italian Sound”:
[Prisencolinensinainciusol] is meant to appeal to a community of native Italian speakers who recognize themselves in their collective mis-hearings—as if, in sonic terms, we might come to know ourselves most acutely by listening for what we cannot quite make out.\(^\text{13}\)

Beguiling about Schwarz’ parting shot here, in relation to previous literature on Prisen, is the phenomenological shift from thinking the song’s words as “Anglophone gibberish” to understanding it as aural representation of a listening to language, as if to say, “I sing your hearing.” This listening is marked by an absence, a rupture—the absence of semantics in a language one doesn’t speak, but is at the same time a marker of national identity. The absence of semantics is however shared by a linguistic community, the community of those who speak Italian. Italians are defined not only, or even primarily, by their common tongue, but by their way of attending to sounds they cannot parse. This lack is nothing other but the Janus’ profile of the more familiar, post-enlightenment ideology of the Italian voice as the glorious excess of logos, an ideology that accompanied the Mitteleuropean reception of Italian opera from Rousseau to Madame de Staël, and influenced—once the excess was conceived as the masking of a lack of linguistic cohesion and thus capacity for democracy—Gramsci’s historical analysis.\(^\text{14}\)

The notion of a commonality of mishearing, or of a commonly perceived linguistic rupture is not really a twentieth-century invention, but a current that runs deep in Italian thought about language and politics. The debate around Italian linguistic


\(^\text{14}\) The texts referenced here are Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Essay on the Origin of Languages (1781), Madame de Staël’s On the Spirit of Translation (1816), and Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks (1948), in which language is a ubiquitous but perhaps unsystematic occasion for reflection. Among the notebooks, the last one No. 29 is devoted entirely to reflections on language.
identity was already two centuries old by the time Niccolò Machiavelli—whose
Prince (1513) is, of course, driven by an idea of politics, constant enmity and revolt
derived from Italy’s political asset in the sixteenth century—formulated his contribution
to the debate. Writing in 1524, in a peninsula that was being claimed piecemeal by
warring empires and the papacy, Machiavelli formulated a definition of linguistic identity
evidently aimed against purists; power of appropriation, rather than imperviousness to
foreign influences, makes a tongue worthy of carrying the power of a state. But this
appropriation is marked with rupture and conflict. War has seeped deep into
Machiavelli’s concept of national language:

Oltre di questo, io voglio che tu consideri come le lingue non possono essere
semplici, ma conviene che sieno miste con l'altre lingue. Ma quella lingua si
chiama d'una patria, la quale convertisce i vocaboli ch'ella ha accattati da altri
nell'uso suo, ed è sí potente che i vocaboli accattati non la disordinano, ma ella
disordina loro: perché quello ch'ella reca da altri lo tira a sé in modo che par suo.15

[Besides this, I want you to consider how languages cannot be simple, but it is fit
that they should mix with other languages. Yet we call the language proper to a
country that which is so powerful that the words taken up don’t disarrange it, but
rather she disarranges them: for whatever she carries from other languages she has
drawn to herself in such a way that it seems her own.]

The telltale sign is that twice-repeated word, “disordinare”—to disarrange, to untidy. It is
this movement of negation—an undoing rather than a doing, a scrambling away from
coherence—that defines the life of a country’s home language. It is rupture and
negativity—the power to unmake things—that mark the conjunction of language with
state power. The result is a vision of language that is mercurially mobile, perpetually

15 See fn. 1.
tense towards the next change, the next disarrangement that a static national identity is not only elusive, but nearly inconceivable.

The attitude towards the non-semantic aspects of language that Schwarz hints at is a product of Italian linguistic identity because—as Gramsci would have it—Italian itself had a history of being at once the official common tongue and a non-semantic experience to many of the peninsula’s inhabitants. Italian, a tongue whose nation-wide spoken practice was of recent vintage by the time Celentano produced this song, had long held the international reputation for inherent musicality precisely as a byproduct of its scarce semantic value within a territory riddled with dialects, the linguistic remnants of centuries of conflicting occupiers.

Celentano’s mimicked prosody of English thus takes advantage of a mode of processing linguistic identity—an acceptance and even celebration of the non-semantic as a core aspect of language—that was hardwired into the peninsula’s political history. Prisen is an exquisitely Italian product by virtue of this mode. The processing of foreign languages and of the Italian language shared in the very same social and political history. This is quite concretely true of Celentano’s song; here, this power of appropriation of the non-semantic is exercised in relation to the language—American English—that had most heavily seeped into Italian culture in the post-war years, and through the same emerging

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16 Important work on how languages marginalized by the project of modernity come to be enjoyed, and yet dismissed, as “nonsense,” particularly through certain genres of song, has been carried out by David Samuel in his “Language, meaning, modernity, and doowop,” *Semiotica*, No. 149 (May 2004), 297-323. In engaging with this article, I wish to emphasize the role (already delineated in Samuels) of this modernity within the speech and song of the singers who fashion this resistant nonsense music, rather than something of an external pressure. I take normative notions of language to be a fully internalized factor that constitute not only the repressive force that makes sense triumphant over nonsense, but the source of the friction from whence a song like *Prisen* draws its energy.
state-wide media channels—television, radio, the record industry, and schooling—that helped to disseminate Italian as an official spoken tongue. Not by coincidence, the most popular television performance of Prisen, on 16 February 1974—which marked the song’s skyrocketing to the top of hit parades—was prefaced by a semi-improvised sketch between presenter (and singer) Mina and Celentano, in which Mina jokingly asked the performer for his wisdom on the twenty-year anniversary of TV broadcasting in Italy.

Much is contained in this reference: TV broadcasting had begun in 1954 in Milan, just as Celentano and Mina were cutting their teeth as singers, already on the brink of national fame; language, dialect, the aural landscape of Italian rock n’ roll, and Milanese belonging, and Italy’s entrance into a modern European cosmos are all summoned up by Mina to set the scene. Prisen, it turns out, is Celentano’s non-sensical ode to this constellation.

Schwarz’s notion of “collective mis-hearings” resonates strikingly with contemporary Italian thought about community—particularly with the work of Roberto Esposito. His Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community (1998) famously turned on its head the notion that communities are based on a positive, shared entity—such as land, race, or right—and postulated that at the heart of community is a shared absence or debt:

From here it emerges that communitas is the totality of persons united not by a "property" but precisely by an obligation or a debt; not by an "addition" but by a "subtraction": by a lack, a limit that is configured as an onus, or even as a defective modality for him who is “affected.”

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To bring Esposito’s notion of the absence/unpaid debt at the core of community in dialogue with matters of Italian linguistic identity—at least as they are performed in Prisen—we only need think of the imbrication of American politics and culture into the Italian post-war. The mis-hearing of American English—on behalf of a community whose defining characteristic had long been linguistic and political fragmentation—is ultimately a profoundly communitarian statement. The failure to parse American English into semantics is not a byproduct of Italian identity, but rather defines a linguistic community through the language that is not its own but whose sound has become part and parcel of its aural experience. In order to be “Italian” one must be misunderstood: Italian aurality possesses what it cannot own. And this mishearing is also, unmistakably, the marker of a more general, but unquantifiable debt towards America, a place whose enmeshment into the rise and structure of Italy’s first democratic government—both through the allied troops’ intervention against Nazi occupation, and through the financial maneuver that Georges Bataille singled out as the twentieth-century incarnation of radical expenditure: the Marshall Plan.18

The Marshall Plan—or the European Reconstruction Program—was never, that is, based on loans; most of the 13 billions distributed (some 120 billion in current dollar currency) between twelve European countries between 1948 and 1951 were grants given out at no condition or with no expectation of repayment. Italy was the third largest recipient of Marshall plan grants after the UK and France, receiving 1,188.2 million

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dollars in grants, versus a mere 73 million in loans and 78.2 in conditional aids. It was under the auspices of Marshall investments that the northern country’s industrial network could purchase the raw materials and mechanical equipment to rise into the financial boom of the late 1950s. The reason Bataille is so taken with the Marshall plan is not, of course, because it is an act of radical selflessness on behalf of the creditor—it is no mystery to Bataille or to us that America used these funds to ensure the stability and complicity of Europe’s Western Bloc, of which Italy was, after all, one of the easternmost provinces—but because it is a gift given without the prescribed repayment plan or interest rates that classical economics would dictate. It is not, that is, an operation driven by foreseeable financial profit. The power of the Marshall Plan was, in other words, that it payed forwards something for which the return remained unquantifiable in financial terms but—for that reason—much more potent at the level of general human resources and activities.


20 Bataille delves into the Marshall Plan by quoting extensively from the writings of François Perroux, whose definition of the Plan as “an investment in the world’s interest” returns throughout the final chapter of the first part of *The Accursed Share*. See Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol 1; esp. 176-177.

21 Whether General Marshall had actually conceived the Plan in such radical terms as Bataille is of course another question entirely. Scholarly analyses of the Marshall plan attest to an original desire to refashion Europe in America’s image, by softening national boundaries for the sake of the circulation of capital and implementing Keynesian programs of state-aided deflation; but individual states—and Italy among them—did not necessarily comply with these plans, choosing to invest the funds received according to nationally devised reconstruction plans. It is highly interesting that these failures to comply with restructuring plans did not seemingly determine a withdrawal of funds on behalf of the US. On the departures of Italy from the US’s Keynesian plan for restructuring see Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, “International Aid to Southern Europe in the
To put this in Roberto Esposito’s terms, then, the Marshall Plan was not so much a loan but something closer to a munus, an obligatory giving—from a United States that could not afford facing the Soviet bloc without a compliant Western Europe—that demanded an equivalent paying forward on behalf of the beneficiary. Although the grants of the Marshall plan required no repayment, it was important that Italians should stay grateful, that is, aware of their obligation to produce capital to pay forward. And it is because of the lack of the need for monetary retribution that this gratefulness manifested themselves in a stream of cultural production, an immaterial capital that would bind the US to Italy and even—with Italy functioning as a conduit—across the iron curtain to Eastern Europe. I take the entire arch of Celentano’s career as a singer—of which I consider Prisen to be the apex—to reflect the political economy of the American munus to Italy. One of the most fascinating aspects of Celentano’s career was his achievement of stellar fame in the USSR; he even went on tour to Russia in 1987, and then again in 2012, under Putin’s auspices. I would argue that Celentano’s role as a carrier and a repayer of

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22 This is an aspect that comes out in the scholarly work on the propaganda associated with the Marshall Plan in the beneficiary countries. See for instance David W. Elwood, “Italian modernization and the propaganda of the Marshall Plan,” and Maria Adelaide Frabotta, “Government Propaganda: Official Newsreels and Documentaries in the 1950s” in Luciano Chelos, Lucio Sponza (eds.), The Art of Persuasion: Political Communication in Italy from 1945 to the 1990s, 23-48 and 49-62, respectively. A particularly striking example is the reel Thanks America, made by one Sandro Pallavicini in 1948 with film tapes borrowed from America, for projection in Italian cinemas. The American Ambassador in Rome apparently quoted this film in a letter dated 27 April 1948 to encourage the continuation of financial aids from America to Italy. See Frabotta, “Government Propaganda,” 51.

23 On this see for instance Franco Recanatesi, “La passion di Ivan si chiama Adriano.” La repubblica, 3 July 1987, available at
the Marshall munus has to do with language as the currency in which cultural capital is paid forward in Italy. As I have been arguing in previous chapters, Italy’s internal linguistic disunity and lack of a widely spoken national language, in the 1950s, made for a particularly fertile ground for the absorption of foreign languages as a sonic material. The acceptance of mishearing was not only an integral part of everyday listening practice, but a form of cultural capital. And after all, Italy’s geopolitical position as the southern periphery of Europe had long been manifested in a long literary and philosophical tradition celebrating its rich vocality—while simultaneously and implicitly dismissing its capacity for language. No city was as aware of the curse of Italian southernness, or as profoundly changed by the Marshall funds as Milan. The capacity to bind failed communication to sonic materiality was an indigenous asset to Italy as a state, an inexhaustible and cheap resource that found in Milan one of its nodal points of elaboration. It is within this political economy of language—one from which music cannot be separated—that Celentano would manage to reach past the iron curtain by spooling the gift of American language into a prestigious Italian export.

4.3 Celentano’s Nostalrock (1973)

In 1973 Celentano re-issued the song as part of Nostalrock, an album consisting by and large of jazz rock n’ roll covers interspersed with brief snippets of male chorus Alpine songs from Italy’s mountainous northern borders. This was, in Italy, the first and

last time Prisen would be placed in an overtly Anglophone context. The album, whose intentions are far from parodic but instead speak to an earnest tribute, is something of an oddity within Celentano’s output at the time; although he had made his career singing rock n’ roll covers in the late 50s, Celentano had not sung in English for nearly ten years, dedicating his time to authoring and singing Italian-language songs with bland, conformist political themes ranging from decrying Milanese pollution and industrialization (“Un albero di trenta piani,” 1972) to lampooning workers’ strikes (“Chi non lavora non fa l’amore,” 1970) and occasional expressions of catholic faith (“Il signore al piano di sopra,” 1972). As Stephen Gundle argues in his article on the beginning of Celentano’s career, Celentano earned his fame by ably making rock n’ roll palatable to a catholic, Christian Democrat audience, rather than by upholding it as a genre overtly in conflict with conservative social and sexual mores. Thus, although his success in the 1950s was largely owed to his appeal to youth cultures he sustained his career by adapting to a hegemonic cultural discourse based on Catholicism and moralistic decrying of societal decay. It is not a coincidence that Celentano’s negotiation of a political identity—or of the studied lack of one—coincided not only with his increased fame and media presence as a television or radio guest, but in general with his increasing use of Italian for his songs, a language his audiences could understand far more readily than the snarled English of his rock n’ roll covers. The return to English in Nostalrock is, therefore—as the “nostalgia” embedded in the title suggests—a conscious return to a past style of performance, but also, inevitably, an absorption of his past work as an urlatore.

(the Italian word for Elvis-style rock n’ rollers) into his present work as a more intellectually respected Italian-language singer.

The development of Celentano from an Apulian family immigrant posing as rock ‘n roller to an established singer whose reflections upon his past career have commercial value shows, however, a far less smooth-surfaced process than that shown my Gundle’s analysis. If Gundle insists on Celentano’s craft in adapting rock n’ roll to a conformist mainstream, it is also true that Celentano’s persona as a television personality (he starred in several films throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and became a television presenter in the 1990s) relied on a mixture of polemics, irony, and affected gormlessness whose stylistic staple is his unique way with language: a mumbled Milanese accent constantly ruptured by forgotten words or by his flaunted mishearings or misunderstandings of his interlocutors. His conformism was, that is, paired with language games that constantly gave the lie to a less-than-earnest performance of a part.

This incipient way with language is evident in the complex semiotics of the songs Celentano chose to cover and in the overall structure of the album. Nostalrock’s sixteen tracks read as follows:

1 Pennsylvania 65000 (Glenn Miller cover, fragment) 1:00
2 Prisencolinensinainciusol (Adriano Celentano, full track) 3:27
3 Sul Cappello (Le Penne Nere) (Traditional Alpine Chorus, fragment) 0:27
4 Send Me Some Lovin’ (Little Richard cover, full track) 2:20
5 Guitar Boogie (Arthur Smith cover, instrumental, fragment) 0:55
6 Only You (XXX, full track) 3:00
7 Guitar Boogie (Arthur Smith cover, instrumental, fragment) 1:00
8 Lotta Lovin’ 2:12
9 I Will Drink The Wine 3:32
10 Tutti Frutti (Little Richard cover, full track) 2:33
11 In The Mood (Glenn Miller cover, instrumental, fragment) 1:00
12 We're Gonna Move (Frank Sinatra cover, full track) 2:22
Aside from the idiosyncratic Prisen, the only song in the record authored by Celentano, the album consists of three distinctive kinds of materials. The first kind of material—exemplified by the opening track, and recurring in tracks 7 and 11—are minute-long fragment of jazz tracks from the 1930s and 40s. The second type consists of two thirty-second excerpts (placed symmetrically as tracks 3 and 14, the third and third-but-last tracks of the album) of male choruses singing songs by Italy’s mountaineers—the Alpini, whose roots lay in the northern regions of Lombardy (the region whose main city is indeed Milan) and Piedmont (the north western region closest to Milan). The last kind of material, comprising all remaining tracks, are straightforward covers (in which both instrumentation and vocal techniques of the covered track are closely replicated) of rock n’ roll tracks. Within these three rather heterogeneous numbers Prisen is posited as a sonic trump-card, the aural go-between: it is cross faded into the end of Pennsylvania 65000, and connects that first track with the first excerpt of Alpine chorus singing; at the end of the album, although unlisted, it returns to interrupt “Be–Bop–A–Lula,” and again the final track “Shake Rattle n’ Roll,” each time prompting Celentano to suspend the performance by speaking and reflecting on the track he is performing in ways that I examine at the end of this section.

Let’s begin by considering the first kind of material, the one-minute excerpts from swing tracks. These three short inserts are, with the exception of “Pennsylvania 65000,” instrumental, and they are also—again with the exception of the opening track—twelve-
bar blues. The choice to highlight the harmonic structure of the blues through brief excerpts whose moderate tempo and mild instrumentation makes the structure almost pedantically clear seems here almost like a lesson in the history of rock n’ roll; for instance, the riff from “Guitar Boogie” frames “Only You” (a song that does not have a 12-bar blues structure) as if to insert it in a soundscape of reference. Of course, to a historically informed listener, the reference also highlights the debt of swing and rock n’ roll (both musical genres in which white performers successfully appropriated traits that were proper to black contemporaries) to African American musical production. And yet the one-minute excerpts picked by Celentano are all from tracks by white musicians, thus allowing the racial connotations of blues structures to be, if not erased, then at least very subtly encrypted. As we will soon see, the process of erasure or encrypting of blackness brings us deep into Celentano’s relationship to Milan.

For now, however, we need to observe that the tracks also operate at another—for Italian audiences in the 1970s, much more apparent—level of signification, one tightly imbricated in political matters of language. Both of the Glenn Miller covers—“Pennsylvania 65000” and “In the Mood”—were among the American jazz records illegally circulated under fascism, records that had to be circulated under false Italian names whose plethora of invention delights linguists to this day.25 In the music black market of fascist Italy, Miller’s “In the Mood” became “Tristezze,” a title that preserves the number of syllables of the English original but distorts its meaning in striking ways: “tristezze,” sadnesses, does not refer to the title but is rather an Italian rendition of the

term “blues,” which in “In the Mood” do not signify the actual mood of the piece (an upbeat major-key swing) but rather precisely the brisk 12-bar blues with which the track opens. Thus the Italian language begins to toy—with puzzling results—with American musical terms. “Pennsylvania 65000” was rendered under fascism as the silly title “Zia Francesca sono Cicci,” a tongue-in-cheek re-inscription of the reference to phone-operator instruction of the title into a local, familiar phone-call scenario whose rhythm and accent structure matches the original title so closely as to almost seem like a deliberate mishearing of English as Italian words, a process well known to linguists as the Law of Hobson-Johnson. Carrera mentions the Law of Hobson-Jonson as the way to obtain what he calls an “impure [or hybrid] mondegreen,” that is, a mondegreen that moves between two languages. It is also interesting that he, like Luciano Berio and Umberto Eco had back in the days of Omaggio a Joyce, quickly remarks on how “la ricchezza dei mondegreens è strettamente legata alla lingua inglese, nella quale il rapporto fra lingua e trascrizione è tanto vago quanto il codice penale anglosassone basato sul common law” [the richness of mondegreens is strictly tied to the English language, in which the relationship between language and transcription is as vague as the anglosaxon penal code based on common law], and he adds that this is in opposition to a language like Italian, whose literary origin had a disciplinary role with regards to pronunciation.26

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26 The fascination with American English of Celentano, then, could be read in a linguistic-political sense as a way of retrieving a potentiality for linguistic invention that the highly disciplined Italian language did not have in its spoken practice. Of course, others chose to reactivate this potentiality through the use of dialect, but as we will see in the course of this chapter, that would have been a nearly impossible choice for a first generation Apulian immigrant in Milan.
This comparison of the obscure but freer-floating signifiers of the English to the strictures of the Italian language has a subtle political charge. In the history of fascism adaptations of English titles have, and had, something of an incantatory linguistic and political function. The fascist decades were a time in which American culture—forbidden by the regime—was perceived, in anti-fascist circles, as a signifier of a distant, ideal political freedom. Adaptng a forbidden language’s song titles in Italian was done by producing titles that were silly or nonsensical, a mode of inoculating the Italian language imposed by the regime with the encrypted traces of a language from a desirable political “elsewhere.” But there is more: the fact that these traces corresponded so little to the English original, or were often downright grotesque (such as Handy’s “St Louis Blues” translated into the pious-sounding “Le tristezze di San Luigi”) lent the enforced Italian the aura of deterritorialzation, to use Deleuze’s celebrated term. By sounding like something that was not quite right—a sign, for those in the know, of the musical linguistic conglomerate hidden therein—these titles made Italian into something wholeheartedly appropriable by those who resisted the regime.

It is likely that the cultural symbolism of pieces like “Pennsylvania 65000” would have been known to Celentano, whose parents had indeed moved to Milan in the 1930s. It is thus hardly a coincidence that “Pennsylvania 65000”—quoted in abbreviated form,

27 On a historical overview of the shifting valences of American culture in Italy across the twentieth century, see Sandro Portelli, “The Transatlantic Jeremiad: American Mass Culture and Counterculture and opposition in Italy.” In Rob Kroes et al., eds., Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe (Amsterdam: Vu University Press, 1993), 125-138. Of the Fascist decades, Portelli writes that the US became “a place in the mind, a projection of democratic and radical imagination” (126).
as befits, perhaps, sound materials that are able to signify as mere soundbites—should “open” for Prisen in the tracklist. The swing piece works, that is, both as a historical precedent for an intense moment of interaction of Italian and American culture, and as linguistic exchange enabled by music.

And yet the context for American culture in the early 1970s was hardly the political idyll imagined by anti-fascist sonophiles. It is indeed in the gap between the first two tracks (and between the second and third tracks) that the “nostalgia” embedded in the album title is most profoundly nested. By the 1970s, the Milan in which Celentano grew up was permeated with the English language, sonically, and with American political concerns. Celentano’s rise to fame in the late 50s—in the burgeoning Milan of the “miracolo economico,” the financial rebirth of the city for which the Marshall Plan’s American investment in Italy’s Northern Industry was instrumental. It was Milan that hosted, on 18 May 1957, the first rock n’ roll signing competition in the country, at the large ice-rink palace known as Palazzo del Ghiaccio. And it was on this very occasion that Celentano first obtained nation-wide attention, with his Elvis-esque interpretation of “Ciao ti dirò.”

29 Celentano’s debut at the Palazzo del Ghiaccio has become deeply burrowed in the discourse around contemporary Milan. See for instance the Italian edition of John Foot’s Milan since the Miracle: City, Culture and Identity (London & New York: Berg Publishers, 2001) entitled Milano dopo il miracolo: biografia di una città (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003), 24; or in the periodical Imprese e città, the periodic review from the Camera del Commercio Milanese (the Milanese chamber of commerce) in which an article mentions Celentano’s performance at the Palazzo del Ghiaccio in relationship to the urban re-adaptation of 19th and early 20th century ice factories in Milan. “This is the place” write the authors “where Celentano made his debut in 1957. Palazzo del Ghiaccio is a well-known and “mythical” place for the Milanese”; Pasquale Alferj, Alessandra Favazzo, “Nuovi spazi dell’economia urbana,” Imprese e città, No. 3 (Spring 2014), 69-78: 70. Among the publications to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Italian unification
By the early 1960s, Celentano’s rock n’ roll songs were a widespread cultural symbol, yet one that, among the intelligentsia, had a bitter aftertaste. Fellini would hire him to make a quick appearance as a scatting, dancing rocker materializing before the alienated Roman night-revelers of *La Dolce Vita* (1961): something of an antithetical figure to the dialect-speaking—but alluringly taciturn—girl who appears on the beach to a disillusioned Marcello Mastroianni in the film’s final scene. Pasolini, crafting a script for a film based in Milan entitled *Milano Nera* in those same years, would have his music blast out of jukeboxes in bars at the periphery of Milan, the soundtrack for well-to-do Milanese youths decked out as teddy boys who engage in acts of petty vandalism, violence and theft out of mere existential boredom.³⁰

Ten years later, America’s cultural stock had only grown more ambiguous, but not any less pervasive. American music would be transmitted on the radio, dubbed American films would thrive in cinema box offices, and Italy’s television programs were developed according to models that were unmistakably American. As Italian student protesters marched against the Vietnam war in 1969, left-wing activists began wielding the newly minted notions of cultural imperialism and, amidst the increasing terror-like atmosphere of the 1970s, talks of the CIA’s intervention in Italian national politics

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³⁰ The film was never directed by Pasolini, but instead used by Gian Rocco and Piano Serpi for the film *Milano nera* (1961). Pasolini’s original script was recently published by Il Saggiatore: see Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La nebbiosa* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2013). Notably, Celentano has claimed that it was his song “Il ragazzo della via Gluck” that inspired the concept for Pasolini’s script, which seems unlikely given that the song was first performed in 1966, five years after the script was conceived: see Celentano, *Rockpolitik*, Maurizio Ciotta, ed. (Milan: Bompiani, 2006), 51-56.
degenerated into a climate of general paranoia. Celentano was not one to sympathize with such a leftist distrust of America, of course, but he was an extraordinarily able wader of dicey political waters; by the time he was working on Nostalrock he knew that any unselfconscious appropriation of rock n’ roll would not be successful anymore. The knowing setting of Prisen into a history of Italy’s interactions with American music is the first step towards the inscription of the song into an updated symbolic constellation.

31 The Wikileaks Kissinger cables released between 1973 and 1976 prove that the U.S. kept a close watch on the repression of the extreme right in Italy, as well as press allegations (from left-wing newspapers and extra-parliamentary left-wing pamphlets) that the U.S. was involved in the funding and encouragement of the extreme right as a way of reigning in the P.C.I. Although the cables do not provide evidence to substantiate such a claim, the amount of cables from Italy to Washington (as well as, occasionally, Ho-Chi Min) shows that the U.S. was anxious about the legal trial of members of the far right, particularly when they were involved in the police force or National Security, and considered them outright plots by the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left. See for instance the cable of 25 January 1974: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COLONEL SPIAZZI'S ARREST(REPORTEDLY THE FIRST SUCH ARREST FOR SUBVERSION SINCE WW II INVOLVING A HIGH RANKING MILITARY OFFICER) IS THAT IT FUELS THE CAMPAIGN OF THE LEFT WING PRESS WARNING OF THE EXISTENCE OF NEO-FASCIST INFLUENCE AND SYMPATHIZERS IN THE POLICE, ARMED FORCES AND FOREIGN MINISTRY AND ARGUING THE NEED TO ROOT THEM OUT. […] THE EMBASSY IS PREPARING AN AIRGRAM REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY RIGHT AND ON THE GOVERNMENT'S INCREASED WILLINGNESS IN RECENT MONTHS TO CRACK DOWN ON THEM. Available at https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1974ROME00566_b.html; accessed 10 August 2015. In April 2013, The Italian weekly L’Espresso has released a thread of stories based on the Kissinger cables, led by Stefania Maurizi, which goes into some detail as to the U.S.’s encouragement of the extreme right. For the beginning of the thread see Stefania Maurizi, “WikiLeaks: le trame d'Italia,” L’Espresso, 8 April 2013, available at http://espresso.repubblica.it/internazionale/2013/04/08/news/wikileaks-le-trame-d-italia-1_52840; accessed 10 August 2015.
The second kind of material in the album, exemplified by the track following Prisen in *Nostalrock*, is Alpine chorus music. Appearing in 30-second snippets that, again, seem to function as soundbites rather than as fully-fledged song tracks, they are performed by the ensemble Coroanaroma, (the choir of the Associazione Nazionale Alpini in Rome) conducted by Lamberto Pietropoli. The track following Prisen, entitled “Sul Cappello (Le Penne Nere)” [“On the Hat (Black Feathers)’’] is a slow, soulful three-part a cappella song performed in a Piedmontese dialect-tinged Italian by a non-professional male chorus. Listed as “traditional,” it likely dates to the late nineteenth century. More precisely, it dates sometime after 1872, when the light militia group known as Alpini was instituted by the new Italian monarchy as a way of guarding the northern natural boundary of the nation-state, the Alps (across which had laid, of course, the fading might of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). As it turns out, the Alpini never really absolved more than a symbolic military function, but they produced a corpus of songs that experienced something of a micro-renaissance in occasion of the institution’s centenary, 1972—the year of Prisen’s release as a single.\(^{32}\) The song’s lyrics speak to the patriotic role of the Alpini guarding the mountains against invaders:

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\text{Sul cappello, sul cappello che noi portiamo,} \\
\text{C’è una lunga, c'è una lunga penna nera,} \\
\text{Che a noi serve, che a noi serve da bandiera,} \\
\text{Su pei monti, su pei monti a guerreggiar, oï là là.}
\]

[On the hat, on the hat that we wear

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\(^{32}\) The centenary, which fell on 10 May 1972, was celebrated nationally through a variety of memorial practices, such as national gatherings—including a 200,000-people parade in Milan on 14 May 1972—issuing of special edition stamps; monument building in Legnano, historical monographs, and coverage in the national press.
There is a long, there’s a long black feather  
Which serves, which serves as our flag  
When we are up in the mountains fighting, oi la la]

Yet to understand the insertion of such material within an album by a Milanese singer, we need to consider that Milan (a city that lies just beneath the Swiss-Italian alps) the discourse around the Alps was not merely a nationalist discourse, but a poetics of boundaries too subtle to truly devolve into brute essentialism. Milan’s fog and pollution notoriously prevented its inhabitants from seeing the Alps, even though the mountains would—on a clear day—be easily within sight.33 This frequent invisibility is part and parcel of the poetics of Milan’s tenuous belonging to Italy. Being out of sight lends the proximity of the natural boundary a near-mythical allure, as the haunting presence of the city’s inhabitants’ shifting sense of belonging.

It is in this double valence of symbol both of national belonging and of the limit of that belonging that Celentano used the sonic imagery of the Alps in Nostalrock. If we look at Celentano’s past career and recurrent themes of his Italian-language output, we notice immediately that the criticism of Milan’s pollution—and of the industrial destruction of the land upon which the city rests—is twinned with a constant sense of personal nostalgia for the days of his childhood in a lost Milanese periphery (Via Gluck, on the west side of the Stazione Centrale) that tapered gently into an idyllic mountain-

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33 Interestingly, this same poetics of boundaries is applied in recent scholarship to the Alpini themselves, thanks to historical documentation retrieved in Milan in 2005, now consultable at the CAI (Club Alpini Italiano) headquarters in Milan. See for instance Stefano Morosini, *Sulle vette della patria: politica, guerra, e nazione nel club alpino italiano (1863-1922)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2009).
This nostalgia for the rural pre-modern was something Celentano would articulate at length in his autobiography of 1982, when he wrote, Diciamo che sono un bastardo, proprio diviso, perché certo c’è questa cosa qui che parlo in Milanese, canto in Milanese, la testa è una mente del nord; poi c’è l’affetto c’è la nostalgia di chi ha dovuto lasciare qualcosa. Senz’altro quello che è successo a me con la via Gluck sarà successo a quelli del sud quando hanno dovuto, per bisogno, andare in Germania a lavorare. C’è questa analogia qui, però io non mi sento sradicato, cioè, io l’unica volta in cui mi sono sentito sradicato è quando mi hanno tolto dall’ambiente naturale in cui ero inserito: l’ultima casa, I prati sconfinati e, in fondo, le montagne.

[You might say that I am a bastard, truly divided, because of course there’s this thing that I speak in Milanese, I sing in Milanese, my head is a northern mind; then there’s the fondness, there’s the nostalgia of someone who had to leave something behind. Without a doubt what happened to me with Via Gluck must have happened to southerners who had to—out of necessity—go to Germany to work. There’s this analogy, except that I don’t feel uprooted, I mean, the only time I have felt uprooted was when they removed me from the natural setting in which I was immersed: the last house, then meadows as far as the eye can see, and in the backdrop, the mountains.]

What Celentano never states openly—but does gingerly hint at—is that he is the son of a migrant family from Apulia—a fact that would, in 1950s Milan, saddle him with

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34 Il ragazzo della via Gluck, premiered at the Sanremo Festival in March 1966 and was issued as a general release album entitled “Il ragazzo della via Gluck” in November 1966 by Clan Celentano. The words are by Luciano Beretta and Miki del Prete, and the music is by Celentano himself. The song tells the story of a childhood friend of Celentano who moves into the city proper from the periphery and of his terrible sense of loss. It is easy enough to gather that the “friend” is but a doubling of Celentano himself. An excerpt of the lyrics reads thus: “‘Mio caro amico’ disse/’qui sono nato e in questa strada/ ora lascio il mio cuore/ ma come fai a non capire/ che e’ una fortuna per voi che restate a piedi nudi/ a giocare nei prati mentre lì in centro/ io respiro il cemento /ma verrà un giorno che ritornerò ancora qui /e sentirò l’amico treno che fischia così.... ua ua.’” [My dear friend, he said, I was born here, and on this street I now leave my heart, how can you not understand, how lucky you are to be able to stay barefoot, playing in the meadows, while in the city center I will breathe concrete, but one day I will return here, and hear my friend the train whistle like this, wa wa]

certain class and racial connotations. Celentano never played up this element of his background—and for obvious reasons: the entertainment industry of the late 50s and 60s simply did not represent those born below Rome. This was first of all a linguistic policy against dialects. And indeed it is dialect that, even in his maturity and continuing success, Celentano first brings up when discussing his identity: he—a fully naturalized Milanese—speaks with the local, rather than a southern Italian, dialect. He has passed the Shibboleth test. And yet what he elliptically outlines but never states in the above quote is that his physical features—dark skin and hair—answered to the racialized physical descriptions of southerners that abounded in the years of the economic miracle. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that he casts his non-belonging not in terms of his southern origins, but in terms of a nostalgia he directs to a previous, less industrialized Milan: the city from whence one could once see the mountains. The Alpini songs feed precisely into this twisted discourse of urban and national belonging: a vehicle for a concern with identity that dare not speak its name.

Much Italian literature on Celentano makes a point of specifying, when dealing with the singer’s appropriation of rock n’ roll music, that Celentano’s appropriation excised from the music both its African American heritage and sexually transgressive valence. Music scholar Franco Minganti writes, for instance, writes that

Male Italian performers (Giorgio Gaber, Enzo Jannacci, Adriano Celentano, Peppino di Capri) were anything but menacing; their nonsensical lines and attitudes were generally turned into benevolent and reassuring folly. [...] They posed no threat to anyone, neither physically nor sexually—nor even
symbolically, even though Celentano’s body was oddly double jointed and out of control, and he would post his nickname “Springy” (il molleggiato) for life. 36

This is likely as much a way of asserting Celentano’s rock n’ roll’s cultural inferiority to its model (and the political and cultural complexity therein) as it is of escaping the thorny, and non-articulated relation to race that Milanese rock n’ roll—like many cultural products of the financial miracle of the late 1950s and early 1960s—has. Nostalrock, as a record that takes up the legacy of rock n’ roll some fifteen years after the genre’s explosion in Italy, gives the lie to these claims of innocuous whitewashing. Consider, for instance, the cover of Nostalrock:

36 See Franco Minganti, “Jukebox Boys: Postwar Italian Music and the Culture of Covering,” in Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan (New York& Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 148-165: 156. Stephen Gundle takes a similar position, while defending the ingenuity of Celentano’s take on rock n’ roll, going so far as to assert that “Italy was the product of a culture that, for all its regional diversity, was in many respects more homogeneous than the American one. The historic influence of the Catholic Church was a key factor here, as was the absence of ethnic diversity and of a real tradition of individual dissent.” See Gundle, “Adriano Celentano and the Origins of Italian Rock and roll,” 369. My analysis of Prisen pushes squarely in the opposite direction to both theses, making it symboling precisely of a political order whose history is marked by linguistic, racial and geopolitical conflict and the negotiation of its representation through music.
Emerging from a backlit domestic doorway (over which hangs some kind of potted plant), blinding summer light and a sea rock in the backdrop, Celentano is surrounded by the visual regalia of a Mediterranean setting, a feast of southern European signifiers. The reference is knowing—so much so that the image is framed as a photogram, as if to hint at a well-worn cinematic stereotype. And he—Celentano—is dark, darker than in real life, wearing an outfit (sports jacket and a flatcap) whose point of reference is again, the south.

But is it worse than just a stereotypical Mediterranean setting? Isn’t there a touch of minstrel-like mimicry of the skin color and wardrobe of early twentieth century
southern bluesmen? And what to make of his instrument, a cross between a guitar (soundboard) and mandolin (elongated black neck) that is also, upon closer inspection, a broom, calling back to mind both a southern Italian rural setting and, as a more sinister undertone, the broom and mandolin that clung to racist imagery of the black south? And what are these racial signifiers of the south doing in a record by a singer who has thus far identified himself as northern, and has incarnated the rock n’ roll sonotype of Milanese midcentury modernity? The implicit racism, latent all the way back to the “benevolent follies” of the 1950s, would get only worse. In 1982, Celentano’s “springy” and oddly disjointed physique was the central attraction in the film “Bingo Bongo,” a film that had Celentano, blacked up and roaming around Milan with a pet Monkey, be able to speak with all the animal races.

But let’s proceed with order. The last track of the Nostalrock consists of Celentano’s cover of “Shake, rattle, n’ roll,” another track in blues form, whose original version by Big Joe Turner was—like much rhythm and blues in the 1950s—converted into a major hit by a white musician (in this case, Bill Hailey and his Comets). Halfway through the tracks, and after a couple of cross-fades, Prisen takes over; it’s a less than masterful transition, what with the different tempi and keys of the two tracks, but it establishes a symbolic kinship between the classic rock n’ roll hit Celentano would have recorded in his early career and Prisen, a knowing riff on the work of hearing and mishearing American rock. But soon enough Prisen fades in order to give way to a brief surreal dialogue between Celentano and three other speakers:
English Speaker: Wow, that’s good man, Adriano, that’s really quite something. Where did you learn your English?

Italian Speaker: Hahaha! Eh, Adriano, cos’è che ha detto questo Americano, non ho capito niente!

Adriano Celentano: No dice, così, come ho fatto a parlare l’inglese così bene perché si meraviglia, perché dice che gli Italiani solitamente non lo pronunciano…

ES: What’s he saying?
AC: Sì, dice che lo pronunciano… un po’ male, ecco.
IS: Ho capito ma, scusa, tu l’inglese dov’è che l’hai imparato?
AC: No io non l’ho imparato, io non lo so, l’inglese!
IS: He says he never learned English!
ES: He never learned English, ah! That’s fantastic, for an Italian seems to… it’s good!

African Speaker: Excuse me, excuse me. I am African. Ehm chi è cantante che canta queste belle canzoni. Io voglio subito comprare disco. Chi è, Chi è?
AC: [mimicking the African speaker’s Italian]: me me, si. IO cantante, io canto tutte queste belle canzoni…

[English Speaker: Wow, that’s good man, Adriano, that’s really quite something. Where did you learn your English?

Italian Speaker: Hahaha! Eh, Adriano, what did this American guy say, I didn’t understand anything!

Adriano Celentano: He was saying, well, how did I learn to speak English so well because he is surprised, because he says that Italians usually don’t pronounce it…

ES: What’s he saying?
AC: yes, he says they pronounce it… well, quite badly.
IS: I see, but, say, where did you learn English?
AC: No I never learned it, I don’t speak English myself!
IS [to English Speaker]: He says he never learned English
ES: He never learned English, ah! That’s fantastic, for an Italian seems to… it’s good!

African Speaker: Excuse me, excuse me. I am African. Erm, who is singer who sings these beautiful songs. I want to buy record right away. Who is he? Who is he?
AC: [mimicking the African speaker’s Italian]: me me, yes. I am singer, I sing all these beautiful songs…

Within thirty seconds, the dialogue moves from the discussion of Celentano’s English to the sinister racist mockery of an unspecified “African’s” poor Italian, honing in on a

37 The transcription and translation of the track are my own.
kernel of language politics. Satirical as it may be, the dialogue allegorically stages aspects of Celentano’s own linguistic identity: the American, the Italian, for sure, but also an “African” that might stand in for Celentano’s fear of his own southern—Apulian—heritage.

Celentano admits he does not speak English, and that the fake-English prosody of Prisen is imitation rather genuine speech, all the while understanding the English speaker perfectly. But this power is obtained only at the cost of producing a new subject, grotesquely prone to linguistic submission: a bumbling black man with comically bad Italian. Taking this more specifically into the realm of post-colonial discourse, we are deep into the symptomatology of a Du Boisian “double consciousness”: Celentano has internalized the gaze and ears of a white modernity, and attempts to exorcise the ghost of his own blackness. It is hardly a coincidence that this composite consciousness—which belongs in the deepest folds of African American thought—should be played out through American language and song. But let’s look at the way the allegory is organizes around a color line. First, there’s whiteness: the whiteness of Milanese modernity mimics the even more desirable whiteness of American rock n’ roll—in a game of camouflage that works perfectly on the American in the allegory. He can’t tell apart the American-

38 For the concept of double consciousness, see W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903), available at [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm#](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm#); accessed 5 August 2015. The concept is first evoked in the first section, “Of our spiritual striving”: “The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”
sounding song-speech and actual American English. In a post-colonial linguistic dream, the hegemonic language is absorbed by mere phonetic imitation, without need to subject oneself to the tyranny of its semantics. This flattening of imitative vocal sound and signification, which here serves as a gesture of linguistic empowerment for Celentano, is but the other side of the southern, originary, yet poor-of-logos valence of Italian in the French Enlightenment and German post-Enlightenment discourse. American English is misheard—as Italian once was—as the language so sonorous that it is nothing more than sound. But the new found power of southern language is, after all, the power of an implicit mediterranean blackness, a sibling to the blackness that is also hidden in the rock n’ roll sung-speech that Celentano makes into his language. The African speaker comes in speaking English, after all; but he then switches over into an imperfect Italian—an Italian that marks up his blackness as a non-mastery of a colonial language that curtails his means of self-expression.\textsuperscript{39} Italian, unlike American English cannot be both mimicked and spoken, leaving the African man at the stage of the mimicked racial stereotype, and making Italian nonetheless the language in which the relationship of

\textsuperscript{39} The relationship of race and language was most famously encapsulated by Franz Fanon in \textit{Black Skin White Masks} (1952), trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), particularly in the chapter “The Negro and Language,” 8-27. See p. 8-11: “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. […] What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. […] Yes, I must take great pains with my speech, because I shall be more or less judged by it. With great contempt they will say of me, “He doesn’t even know how to speak French.” What is interesting in Celentano is the way this dynamic is imitated consciously in order to distance himself from the blackness implicit in in his Southerness. If Celentano imitates the sound of sung American English, he also imitates the imitation of an African man who cannot speak the language of his colonizers, which in this case is Italian.
whiteness and blackness is articulated, the tongue through which blackness is evoked as—to use Bhabha’s terminology—a partial object.⁴⁰

There is also a clear communitarian-immunitarian dynamic to be exposed here: Celentano articulates a linguistic impulse towards America that binds together the Milanese middle class youth towards which his song is directed; but he also articulates another desire, that of making Italy—and particularly its southern boundaries—immune to what lies further south: North Africa. The desire for immunity from North Africa is expressed along racial lines, in a semiotic game that partakes of the traditional American whitewashing of rhythm and blues at play in “Shake, Rattle n’ Roll.” But this immunitarian logic takes place most potently at the level of Celentano’s own ethnic profile, staged on the cover. Flaunting his dark(ened?) skin and the southern Mediterranean provenience, Celentano functions as the vaccine, a biological agent of immunity, the weakened form of the blackness that needs to be assimilated in order to ensure permanent defense against its more dangerous facets.

This kind of overt play on structures of belonging would have been unthinkable in the 1950s, years in which immigrant families from southern Italy were regarded with a distinctly racist disdain. The mixture of dread and admiration towards Southern Italy—which found its roots in the cosmopolitan French and German discourse of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—turned into a national racist discourse during the first Italian colonial experiments in the end of the nineteenth century, and had been solidified by decades of Lombrosian scientific racism by the time Mussolini came to

power. In the aftermath of post-world war II, and with the economic rebirth of Milan in the late 1950s, the city was flooded with southern migrant workers who were viewed with suspicion and contempt by the locals. Twenty years later—as southern workers became absorbed into the city and internal migratory flows had slowed down—this same contempt would begin to be redirected towards migrants from abroad, and particularly from Nigeria, Morocco and other North African states. Indeed, immigrants from North-Africa are known to this day in Italy—over and above immigrants from elsewhere—as “extra-communitari.” In 1973, Celentano could afford to flaunt his own southerness as a token of his belonging to Milan, but at the price of leveling to a new group of undesirables the same kind of aural and linguistic disdain that had once been leveled at the community of Southern immigrants in Milan to which he belonged.

Indeed, Celentano’s relationship to his Apulian roots, and particularly to the dialect, resembles much the one to the English language that he jokingly demonstrates in the little allegorical dialogue from Nostalrock: a tongue he fully understands but doesn’t speak, and outwardly denies that he ever learnt, as if engaging in an act of linguistic espionage. His nephew, Bruno Perini, a journalist with whom Celentano collaborated in the late 1980s, maintains that Celentano does speak his family’s Foggian dialect fluently. Indeed, in a biographical documentary on Celentano shot by Gianni Minà in 1977, we see the singer interact with his mother and aunt; he speaks in Italian, but they respond, tease

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41 The bibliography on the development of a racist discourse in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy is vast. A key text particularly the notion of the south of Italy as the “razza maledetta,” the accursed race is Vito Teti’s La razza maledetta. Origini del pregiudizio antimeridionale (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1993).
him and rebuff him in dialect with a complicity that denotes the use of a familial lexicon. Celentano would use his dialect in song only once, when he recorded the duet “Che t’aggia di’, che t’aggia fa’” [loosely translated as “I don’t know what do say to you, I don’t know what to do with you”] with fellow superstar singer Mina, in 1998. The fun of the track lies in the fact that Mina, who is from Cremona, Lombardy, had to be coached by Celentano to sing in Foggian dialect as if it were a foreign tongue. The song’s lyrics, written by Celentano, represent a stereotypically gendered marital squabble: the wife is accused of being pretty but useless in the kitchen, while the husband is reproached for being distant and bad at lovemaking. The single represents a key shift in the attitude towards southern dialects in Italian media analogous, mutatis mutandis, to that described by Elizabeth Povinelli in relation to Aboriginal culture in Australia: from a colonially inflected racial discrimination that excluded southern language and cultural practices from mainstream media (unless southerners were able, like Celentano, to pass themselves off as fully Milanese) to an outwardly benign celebration predicated upon the southerners’ performance of their difference from the North.

The 1970s represent perhaps the key moment of transition from the fear of discrimination of the 1950s to the performance of difference and ethnic particularity; this shift is best gathered by panning out on the generation of Apulian artists and singers born

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42 Both Perini’s assertion and the relevant excerpt from Minà’s documentary can be seen at track marks 11’00”-11’41” in Felice Pesoli’s TV documentary “Milanesi del tacco - La gente di puglia nel capoluogo lombardo,” which was first shown in Milan’s Spazio Oberdan in Via Vittorio Veneto on 15 December 2010, and was broadcast on RAI 3 on 16 October 2012, available at http://www.lastoriasiamonoi.rai.it/puntate/milanesi-del-tacco/817/default.aspx accessed on 28 July 2015.

in the late 1930s, very many of whom found success in Milan. Enzo Jannacci (1935-2013) for instance, the deacon of cabaret-style Milanese song, was also a first generation Apulian immigrant whose break in the city was a cabaret theatre show in Milanese dialect called “Milanin Milanon” (1962); Lino Banfi (1936), one of the most famous Italian actors to this day, left Canosa (Apulia) in 1954 to move to Milan and seek a career in vaudeville theatre. He recounts his early days in Milan as a constant economy of linguistic camouflages: from using a single memorized phrase in Milanese to buy meat scraps on the cheap from a butcher who wouldn’t serve southerners, to his earliest gigs, which speak to the way southerness and American blackness were welded in the aural imagination of Milanese audiences:

Andavo nei trani e iniziavo a canticchiare delle canzoni facendo finta di essere nero, con una calza in testa in cambio di un pasto e un bicchiere di vino... “Il vecchio fiume, oooh yeah...” Capii da subito che il nostro linguaggio dialettale faceva ridere. 44

I went into taverns and started to croon some songs pretending to be black, with a stocking over my head, in exchange for a meal and a glass of wine... “the old river, oooh yeah...”. I immediately understood that our dialectal language produced laughter.

If to perform in Apulian dialect in 1950s in Milan meant to put on a minstrel show in blackface, by the 1980s entire feature-length comedies revolved around the character—not in blackface but still carrying markers of southerness like wild black hair and facial hair—of the Apulian working in Milan, created by Apulian émigré actors like Diego

44 From Felice Pesoli’s TV documentary “Milanesi del tacco - La gente di puglia nel capoluogo lombardo”. Lino Banfi’s recollection is found at barmark 18’ 47”- 19’ 37”.
Abatantuomo. Abatantuomo performed his character in a highly comical Apulian-Milanese slang, an ironic commentary on the northern-southern hybridity of young immigrants. Celentano’s *Prisen* and its multiple recordings represent the middle point of this transformation, a coded reference to a condition that would become the subject of entertainment in decades’ future.

By way of sealing this silent kinship between Celentano’s work and the community of Apulians emerging in various sectors of the media and the arts, let’s return to the album cover for *Nostalrock* for a moment. If we were to begin chasing down the cinematic pedigree of that image—the Mediterranean gentleman iconography—we would soon encounter a scene from a film by a very different artist, the director, actor and writer Carmelo Bene (1937-2002). Bene was a near contemporary of Celentano, also an Apulian émigré (albeit to Rome) and although he dealt in high-art experimentalism, his first feature film *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*, 1968, was a very cryptic meditation on the Italian south. The film, which received the Jury’s award at the 1968 Venice Film Exhibition and was greeted with equal parts cheer and scandal, is as far from Celentano as we might imagine. An unapologetic hyper-modernist concoction, it is plot-less and largely free of dialogue (narrating voices carry out a diegesis of sort with a Joyceian patchwork of quotes and nonsensical interjections). One its few recognizable traits—referenced in the title—is an hallucinated memory of the massacre carried in Otranto (Apulia) in 1480 out by the Ottoman army, as a reaction to the Apulians’ refusal to convert to Islam. The event becomes for Bene a symbol of a contamination, of a profound but ruinous kinship between Apulia and the Islamic Orient, source of a disquiet that leads the Apulian
protagonist (played by Bene himself) to perenniably try to destroy himself, without knowing why he is doing it or being able to stop attempting. The first scene in which we see him attempt suicide is the one that recalls Celentano’s cover: Bene is framed through a doorway, on a backlit balcony, facing us and slowly bending backwards (the audio-track here consists of close-miked anxious panting and exhalations) until he falls out of the balcony on the barren, drought-ravaged ground beneath.

![Image of Carmelo Bene in a frame from Nostra signora dei turchi, 1968](image)

**Figure 4.2: Carmelo Bene in a frame from Nostra signora dei turchi, 1968**

The similarity between the frame of Bene’s balcony scene and the cover of Nostalrock is so intense—down to the rocky formation on the left, the blue sky behind, the doorway functioning as a frame-narrower (which Celentano’s cover emphasizes by recasting it as actual film tape). And indeed, although the register is radically different, and Bene’s
meditation is outspoken and in a critical historical tone, the theme is similar: a fear of contamination from that which lies south-to-south east (North Africa and Turkey belong to the same geopolitical imaginary from the view point of Italy’s anxious scanning of its own south).

4.4 The 1974 Video Performances

The two video performances of Prisen were broadcast, both on RAI, on December 1973 and on 16 February 1974, respectively, as part of two separate varietà, that is Italian vaudeville entertainment shows (Formula 2, and Milleluci). If Nostalrock was marginally more successful than the initial release of Prisen as a single, the video performances launched the song as a hit by pairing it with ironic but explanatory initial (and scripted) banter between Celentano and another interlocutor, as well as setting it to dance choreographies and also, very well calibrated depictions of dancing multitudes. The latter two elements had the effect of making the singing voice recede from the aural focus, while bringing forth two key elements of the song that helped to wire it—and wire its language—into a pre-verbal, muscular memory: its call and response structure and its exceptional rhythmic drive, all the while fitting the music to a plethora of pleasurable visual signifiers. Take the performance in Formula 2, which was the most popular vaudeville show on RAI 1 in that year. Formula 2 was a comical show, relying mostly on

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45 I have not been able to track down the exact date of Celentano’s participation to Formula 2, other than the year and an approximate month: the show started airing weekly on 24 November 1973, and ended on 12 January 1974. Because the show started in the last week of November, it’s likely that Celentano’s performance was sometime in December.
impressions of famous public figures and celebrities by the presenters Alighiero Noschesi (who’d impersonated Celentano himself ten years prior to the performance of Prisen, in 1963) and Loretta Goggi. The set up for Celentano’s performance has, therefore, a caricaturesque streak: we are in a classroom setting, with Celentano dressed as a school teacher facing four rows of desks populated by mostly blond women in their twenties wearing what can only be described as sexy schoolgirl uniforms: button-downs a size too small, short skirts, high pigtails decked with exaggerated ribbons, the works.

When one of the students demurely asks the professor why he has written a song that has no meaning, he delivers an explanation (quoted earlier in the chapter) about the desire to express the problem of incommunicability, ending on a note that ironically and yet creepily emphasizes the sexual dynamic:

Celentano: This song means universal love, so if you feel that you want to do a gesture of love towards anyone… there’s no-one left, only me… you will just need to say the word and… well, sit down. And now let’s see if you’ve done your homework: [lipsynch track begins] “Prisencolinensinainciusol”

Schoolgirls: In de col men seivuan Prisencolinensinainciusol, Ol rait! [riff picks up]

Musicologists who write so assuredly about Celentano’s lack of a sexual charge (in relation to his performances of the 1950s and 60s) would have a hard time with this performance. As the riff picks up, so do Celentano’s rhythmic pelvic thrusts (a long cry from the gangly awkwardness of his earlier performances that earned him the title of “il molleggiato,” “springy”), and the schoolgirls bounce in time in their seats in a feat of flawless entrainment. It is a discomfiting sight for any contemporary commentator—and
indicative of a widespread practice of sexualization and objectification of female bodies that runs deep, and well into our day, in Italian media. But as a way of working mnemonics and sense into a song previously snubbed on grounds of its unintelligibility, it does the job. For one, the initial vocal call and response of the track is pinned to speaking bodies, and sealed by the physical call and response of the thrust and bounce; but secondly, the gibberish is recast as an extension of Celentano’s god-like sexual charisma, his ability to lock multiple female bodies onto his own pulse; it is the gift of glossolalia, the power to create new languages and have others speak them back to you. No wonder that, in an interview given in 2009 about Prisen in which he was asked whether he’d ever “translate” the lyrics, he replied,

Non c’è bisogno. Sono io la traduzione. Il modo e l’enfasi di come la canto. Sulla copertina c’è scritto che Prisencolinensinainciusol significa amore universale. Infatti se lei guarda il video, quello della scuola, noterà con quanto amore io canto quella canzone!\(^46\)

[There’s no need. I am the translation. The way and the emphasis with which I sing it. On the cover it says that Prisencolinensinainciusol means universal love. Indeed if you look at the video, the one of the school, you’ll notice how much love I put into that performance!]

Celentano’s earlier (and far less successful) experiment with gibberish song—which had been a track about religion (“Il signore al piano di sopra” [The man upstairs])—was

described by one critic as “a delirium of omnipotence.” Indeed, Celentano was cast and would cast himself as God (or at least, as a messenger of God on earth) in more than one of his films in the 1980s. Umberto Eco, master of both matters linguistic and of the backhanded acknowledgements of popular Italian mediatic figures, would liken Celentano’s way with nonsense to that of a protestant American church leader:

Lo stile di Celentano realizza la tecnica classica dei predicatori carismatici protestanti che hanno conquistato l’America. Si tratta dello stesso ritmo, dello stesso richiamo alla fede attraverso formule iterative, dello stesso rapporto tra il predicatore e la folla elettronica. [...] Nei riti del Protestantismo carismatico il senso delle parole conta pochissimo, può diventare pura glossolalia--come del resto in un concerto rock--e non occorre dimostrare che Dio esiste [...] L'appello carismatico è estraneo all'argomentazione [...] non dice che bisogna credere ma che si crede, che noi crediamo, che crediamo e siamo salvi, e siamo gioiosi e siamo giustificati, e Dio ci confermerà nella giustificazione facendoci piovere addosso tutte le sue benedizioni, di cui il denaro, tanto più ne arriva, è il simbolo tangibile.49

[Celentano’s style puts into practice the classic technique of the charismatic protestant preachers that conquered America. We are dealing with the same rhythm, the same call to faith through repetitive formulas, the same relationship between the preacher and the electronic crowd. [...] In the rituals of charismatic Protestantism, the meaning of words hardly matters, it can become pure glossolalia—just as in a rock concert—and it’s not necessary to demonstrate that God exists [...] charismatic appeals are foreign to argumentation [...] it won’t say we need to believe, but that we already believe, we believe and we are saved, and

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47 Sergio Cotti, Adriano Celentano 1957 -2007: cinquant'anni da ribelle (Rome: Editori riuniti, 2007), 89. The song was included in the album before Nostlarock, entitled I mali del secolo.
48 Celentano plays God in the final scene of Asso (1981), written and directed by Franco Castellano and Giuseppe Moccia. He also plays a musical envoy of God (who looks remarkably like Freddy Mercury) in Joan Lui (1985), a film he both wrote, directed and produced.
we are joyous and justified, and God will confirm our justification by showering us with his blessings, among which money, the more it comes in, is the tangible symbol.]

Although Eco could be referring to anything from Quaker settlers to 1970s television preachers, there’s something about his insistence on “charismatic” Protestantism and on the power of voice—as well as the reference of the ties between church and rock n’ roll—that points in the direction of the African-American Baptist tradition in America and its ties to the sinews of black music across the twentieth century. The imagined preacher of Eco’s curmudgeonly pronouncement about Celentano is, to my ears and eyes, implicitly black, just as he is also (pace the scores of female black singers who cut their teeth in Baptist choirs) implicitly male—bringing us to back to the questions of immunitary racial thought at work in Nostalrock’s cover.

Black males were a rare occurrence in Italian television, whereas black females could be a prized sexual symbol in Italian media, so much so that African-American singer and dancer Lola Falana, who would reach stardom in 1972-73 on the new Bill Cosby Show in the U.S., achieved fame in Italy first, where she’d become a staple of TV entertainment since 1967, when she became widely known in Italian TV’s as “La venere nera,” Black Venus. Falana’s persona on Italian TV was that of a sexually confident, sassy performer, while at the same time embodying the tenets of a sexualized female black body whose roots in Italian male desire went back to Italy’s fascist attempts at colonization. Celentano danced and sung with her on television in 1973 (but a few months before the performance of Prisen), in a routine that placed him as the submissive

50 See Gaia Giuliani, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, Bianco e nero: storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani (Florence: Le Monnier, 2013).
character, wittily sized up for physical prowess by Falana, and eagerly following her
dance-steps. Side by side, they perform that same pelvic thrusting that Celentano uses to
drive home that booming Eb riff and 4/4 meter in the Formula 2 performance of Prisen; it
is the sealing of a changed performance style for Celentano in which Falana’s blackness
plays a symbolic role. After all, this is the same Celentano who looks out at us in
blackface from his Nostalrock cover: in a television in which black male performers
(unlike Latin American or African-descent female performers) are eschewed to this day,
he represents the reassuring, southern limit of an Italian whiteness, elements of an
unspoken, southern Mediterranean blackness. No wonder that months later the same
movement would be repeated by Celentano in the direction of a score of very white
looking Italian young women; can it, after all, be a mere coincidence that the globe world
map on Celentano’s teacher desk has the African continent placed directly in the line of
the spectator’s gaze?
Figure 4.3: A still from Celentano’s performance of Prisen on RAI 3’s Formula 2, in 1973

The 1974 video of Prisen—with which we close our chronological excursus—takes us to another visual realm. Hosted—for the first time in Italian TV history—by two female performers, iconic singer Mina and the dancer Raffaella Carrà, the show *Milleluci* was a triumph of sophistication and televisual self-reflexivity. Planned and executed as eight episodes, each celebrating a different facet of Italian entertainment, its sets were in slick, geometrical black and white, and its presenters a vision of cosmopolitan fashion—from the peroxyde blond of Carrà to Mina’s dramatic cat-eye make up. Celentano’s performance, scripted for the episode celebrating the twentieth anniversary of TV
broadcasting, takes place in a set dominated by two parallel rows of angled, human height mirrors, which, thanks to subtle camerawork, allow for a videoclip suggesting spaces and crowds of far greater depth and number, respectively, than the live performance space and dancers (twelve wiry male and female dancers, decked out as 1950s teddy boys) actually entail. There’s something intensely Milanese about this aesthetized abstracted space, a hint of the work of Milan-based artist collective Gruppo T, and particularly Gianni Colombo’s iconic psychedelich installation, *Spazio Elastico*, winner of the 1968 Venice Biennale. Spaces constructed along geometrical purities highlighted by white neon and black and white surfaces recall the bemoaned images of alienating Milanese urban expansion during the financial expansion of 1958-1963, reconstituted as smaller, aestheticized interactive space. This was the art—the only visual art—that Toni Negri had imagined as befitting a marxist sensorium in the contemporary city, and specifically in Milan. In Prisen’s performance the mirrors are used to visually riveting effects against the geometrical formations of the choreography. Dancing mirrored multitudes are conjured up when the chorus sings. Doubling is of the essence to this highly stylized performance. Celentano, on a podium, is flanked by Raffaella Carrà, and the two of them perform the dance to Prisen—whose key move we’d seen Celentano try out alongside Falana the year prior—in hypnotic synch. Gone are the blonde women in school uniforms, the eroticized black female body: we have landed seemingly back at the heart of a cosmopolitan northern modernity of forward gender dynamics, sophisticated TV

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sets, and impeccably choreographed white bodies. Prisen as the sonic token of how Milan would like to be seen and heard.

And yet there is a moment of brief upturning when Celentano delivers a couple of lines to his own reflection in the mirror. He is standing in between the two halls of mirrors, thus effecting a visual mise-en-abîme—which the camera exploits beautifully—that turns the screen into an infinite space populated with pairs of squabbling Celentanos. Although we are dealing with lip-synching to a well-worn track of Prisen, the furrowed brow and direct gaze recall turn the lines into spoken interjections, with an exuberant, confrontational hand gestures whose semiotics are Italian, and stereotypically more southern than northern.
Figure 4.4: Three consecutive frames from Celentano’s brief dialogue with himself at the mirror in the Milleluci performance of Prisen on 16 February 1974.

It is but a moment, but the impact of this performance of orality turns the song performance space on its head, asking us for a moment to believe in a world in which people speak to one another in Prisen’s vocal lines, a process described by Carolyn Abbate as one of the key suspensions of disbelief at play in operatic performance, and at play here, more as an exception than as the rule, in this play of mirrored images. But what is most striking is that this world has traits of a southern dialect that is otherwise not audible in Prisen’s mishearing of American English. It transforms our hearing into a protean linguistic organ, to the extent that the drawled, Americanized vowels of Celentano’s delivery now sound the hybrid vowels—the umlauts, or metaphonoses—of Foggian dialect. Seconds later Celentano, still holding his own gaze, points emphatically with his right hand off the frame, as if to shoo himself out of the shot, and the camera snaps back to a dancing Carrà. Without veering off the prerecorded track for a second, a

52 This idea, recurrent in all of Abbate’s work, is most clearly emphasized in the introduction of Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker’s A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 1-35.
southern double has been summoned to our hearing and dissolved into a cosmopolitan
dancing crowd.

4.5 Conclusion—back to the origins?

To deny the debt towards another, and specifically the owing of that which is most our
own, most proper to us, is Roberto Esposito’s definition of immunity. The immune is the
political body who is not grateful, who expels the other hosted within itself as a foreign
body in an act of self-mutilation. It fits Milan’s attitude towards the southern migrants in
the 1950s and 60s—the years in which Celentano’s star rose—to a tee. It was these same
migrants who provided the cheap, en masse labor force to execute the industrial rebirth
promoted by the Marshall Plan, and these same migrants who were discriminated against,
misheard as senseless babblers from a south that had to be excised from the hubs of
Italian modernity. That Celentano, the son of Apulian immigrants coming of age in the
years of the financial miracle, should end up by providing one of the leading soundtrack
to the Milanese crowds of the late 1950s and 60s is not, however, a freak occurrence, but
the recoil, the backlash of an immunitary that ends up by re-emphasizing, rather than
absolving, the debt, of the internal lack wired within our most proper being.

If Milan’s attitude towards Apulian was racist, exclusionary, even violent it is
because Milan, perhaps more than most Italian cities in the post-war, was haunted by the
fear of being some place’s south, of falling short of the requirements necessary to belong
to an idealized Western modernity. The triumphant America of the 1950s—whose
diplomatic and financial ties to Milan were profound—and its expenditure of vast funds for the reconstruction of the city’s economy was not only the tool for and model behind Milan’s rebirth, but the measurable extent of this rebirth’s limit, a gift and a silent obligation at the heart of that which was proper to Milan, its financial excess and cultural superiority to that which lay geopolitically beneath. Only an Apulian could have sutured such a complex political economy into a musical product; Prisen speaks to this dynamic some twenty years post-facto, at a moment in which the immunitary exclusion of southerners had slackened, and recalibrated towards new sources of immigration—chief among them, the North African states whose citizens wash up on the shores of Gallipoli today.

It is not by coincidence that Esposito’s latest book, *Pensiero Vivente*, published in the US as *Living Thought* (2012) is a reflection on the nature of identity (national and political) that focuses on a tradition of Italian thought in which the origin of any political body is described as a perpetual state of warring tendencies from which no absolution, no abstraction is ever possible. He writes of

> the problematic, and in some ways even antinomic, relationship between antagonism and immanence that is to be found, in different forms, in other phases of Italian thought. […] Conflict does not precede order or […] follow it. But nor can it be said that conflict assails order from the outside, starting from a point that is transcendental to it. On the contrary […] conflict is inherent in order. […] Order […] is inherently conflictual.\(^5^4\)

\(^{53}\) The Marshall Plan allocated far more funds to the so-called industrial triangle of Northern Italy (Milan-Turin-Genoa, in which Milan was by far the largest and most prestigious city, the vertex of the triangle.

\(^{54}\) Machiavelli, whose anti-identitarian notion of the national language jives powerfully with Esposito’s notion of the community’s negative kernel, is a protagonist of *Living Thought*: “I am referring to the problematic, and in some ways even antinomic, relationship between antagonism and immanence that is to be found, in different forms, in other phases of Italian thought. […] Conflict does not precede order or […] follow it.
We can trace this inherent order and conflict into the first material release of Prisen into the market, the original 45rpm record. Let’s remember that Prisen had a companion track in its original 1972 release; in fact, Prisen was the A-side to another track, entitled “Disc Jockey.” It is a track that has gone un-listened to and uncelebrated by the same press that hailed Prisen, which is odd for the very reason that all of the musical elements of Prisen—by which I mean the sampled fragments that coalesce into the track’s riffs—are from “Disc Jockey,” and particularly from the run-on end of the track, which combines improvisation until it arrives at what we’d recognize, once we flip the record, as the opening bars of Prisen: E flat, 4/4, same tempo, same microtonal buzzing of the scordatura drum set; the brass riff, appearing halfway through the song; and Celentano’s lyrics, improvised to a loop of the brass riff and drum and bass pattern at the end of the track. “Disc Jockey” is a far more traditional track than Prisen: in Italian, with predictable lyrics about romance on the dance floor and a singable tune instead of the spoken nonsense of its twin track, it dissolves into improvisation over an E flat drone in the last 1’30” of the 5’08” long song. Here Celentano metamorphoses vocally. The largely diatonic E flat in which he has sung takes a modal turn as he improvises a lamentous vowel melisma on Eb-E natural-G-A flat-B flat, the consecutive minor second and minor third (recurring features of many an Arabic maqam) together with the melismatic phrasing, carrying us suddenly elsewhere. A shorter variation of the phrase is

But nor can it be said that conflict assails order from the outside, starting from a point that is transcendental to it. On the contrary […] conflict is inherent in order. […] Order, in Machiavelli, is inherently conflictual.” Roberto Esposito, Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 53-54.
repeated by a chorus, now with the syllables “pa-ra,” but the Arabic inflection is gone; the brass riff picks up, and within four bars Celentano is improvising again, this time singing the opening lines of what will turn out to be the opening of Prisen, awaiting us on the other side: “Uis de seim cius nau, op de seim ol uait men, in de colobos dai….”
Conclusion

Over the past few years, and especially in the last few months, I have come to imagine my dissertation as a three-dimensional object, a space of the mind in which chronology is, in truth, only an arbitrary ordering principle. Of course, much changes between the 1950s and the 1970s in Milan, and to track these changes through a set of identifiable issues is a classical, and usually efficient, way to write history. But the first and last chapter are in many ways the very same chapter told, so to speak, from a different vantage point, and they fold the intervening chapter in between themselves. Remember that in the opening of chapter 1, Fred Prieberg’s itinerary towards the Studio di Fonologia in 1957 led us to “a tanned man in peasant clothing [who was] blowing into an ancient shawm and […] carrying a white bird in a small wooden cage.” In short, this thesis can be understood as an obsessive, periodical return to the site of his appearance. Isn’t he, after all, the image of the exoticized and racialized Southern body—the very body that constituted Celentano’s greatest unspoken fear as a first generation Apulian in Milan trying to become a rock n’ roll crooner? Aren’t we dealing in the same aural-political imagination here, the same space of the mind, the way that Celentano’s debut as a rock n’ roll singer on 18 May 1957 took place in a Milanese venue—the Palazzo del Ghiaccio—was less than four miles south—slicing diametrically across the city center—of the studio in which Berio was spending evenings splicing Berberian’s voice into the Joycean linguistic scene that is Thema?

The peasant, as a literary incarnation of Prieberg’s exoticizing—and Mitteleuropean—gaze and ear onto Milan is a vision buttressed by the now familiar
Enlightened and post-Enlightenment intellectual tradition. In this discourse, sensuous beauty before logos is the mark of a European south: one hopeless at democracy but rich in an unquantifiable “other” property whose stock rises and falls dramatically—and can be turned into an outright, shameful lack—depending on the historical and economic moment under discussion. Milan is one of the sites in which this view (and this hearing) is highly, and painfully, internalized. If musical representations of linguistic failures and misappropriations coalesce into any kind of symptomatology, the illness is something of a—to use a modification of Jean-Jacques Lyotard’s famous phrase—a “modern condition,” the torsion produced by aiming at a modernity that is perceived never to have happened in earnest. I am once again reminded of Umberto Eco’s nomenclature of 1950s Milanese intelligentsia as the “enlightenment of the Po valley”—a wry and knowing juxtaposition of high cultural signifier and relatively modest geographical determination. Such an internalized sense of being at the periphery of Europe is here counteracted with the eager display of a modernity—be it linguistic, artistic, economic or political—often obtained, as is the case with the current re-hashing of that most late nineteenth-century of events, the World Exhibition, the EXPO 2015, through massive expenditure of public funds. The splendors and miseries of these exhibitions reflect back (to those who are willing to look for them) to the centers of modernity their own stark splendors and miseries. Nor can we forget that Milan, along with the Po valley, is the site of a long-standing, and unsuccessful secessionist movement of Northern Italy from the south, the uglier mutation of this desperate desire to belong with the European north. I am very aware that I am writing nothing here that has not been penned more eloquently within post-colonial discourse, although rarely in relation to Italy, and as far as I know, never in
relation to Milan, the seat of Italy’s financial power and runner-up—after Rome—as international exporter of Italian prestige.

Prieberg’s peasant—usher for and hindrance to the Studio di Fonologia—is a specter that haunts Milanese modernity at large. Think now of the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano. The fact that this major neo-folk collective (the largest of its many siblings across the peninsula) was hosted in Milan speaks to the pull that the notion of a retrievable folk tradition exerted among the left-wing activists of this particular urban centre. Here, Prieberg’s vision signified both the longing for an authentic vocal tradition unspoiled—as opera and pop music might have been—by the exposure to, and consumption by, a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie and a highly self-aware dismissal of that longing. (I noted earlier how Bosio reeled against “the Marxism of the countryside,” the romanticized peasants populating many of the intellectual and musical efforts of the collective). It is this political double consciousness that would produce the many rifts within the collective, and push two exasperated ethnomusicologists to roam the streets of Milan, microphone in hand, in search of a messianic encounter with a sound they could believe in, producing, nearly by accident, a Derridian snapshot of late 60s Milanese urban violence.

It is only now that I am wrapping this work up that I see that this is a thought that runs even in Maderna’s Hyperion, the topic of my second chapter—a topic which I struggled to connect with the ground-floor level, because it seemed to float unperturbed in a rarefied high-modernist atmosphere. What am I to make of Maderna’s choice to not so much set, but re-create (in Pierre Menard-ian fashion) one of the “masterpieces” of German post-Enlightenment, a novel whose plot is centered on the protagonist’s
tragically disappointing journey to Greece to retrieve the ancient roots of Athenian democracy and human brotherhood? It is easier to see—in the face of the current European financial crisis and the way it has delineated the fault-lines of power between north and south—how Hölderlin’s heart rending appraisal of the plummeting political stock of Greece could be a facet of something potentially much darker. I look at the constellation of broken linguistic encounters of Maderna’s Hyperion and imagine a Milanese—in the all the geopolitical liminality that the word carries for me now—retelling of Hyperion’s journey, now to Italy, the land of unfettered melos. It is here—of all places—that the protagonist will find himself paradoxically utterly unable to sing, speak, or make himself at all understood, just like Hölderlin’s Hyperion was so utterly unable to locate the ideal political community in the historic cradle of democratic governance.

Places of origin (of voice, of democracy) are wretched places, summoned into existence only in order to be shown as obsolete and inefficient. But they are also dangerous, destabilizing forces, capable of unmooring the political identity of those who dare to position themselves at the center of any kind of modernity. They are sites capable of showing up munus—Esposito’s term for the common lack and mutual, obligatory gift—that binds together the members of a community, and this case, the European Community.¹ During a particularly tense moment in the Greece debt crisis this summer,

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¹ I am here doing a perhaps less than graceful splice between Esposito’s thought in Communitas (2010) and his reflection on the figure of the origin in Machiavelli from in Living Thought (2012). See Esposito, Living Thought, 47-8: “Opposed to this formless and disquieting substance that can be traced to the figure of the origin, modern knowledge offered the creation of a new beginning: a rational, artificial beginning intended to wipe out all traces of the origin. […] Only after having defined the origin in
some economists brought up Germany’s own history as a beneficiary of debt relief in the aftermath of World-War Two.\(^2\) This moment, quickly papered over by the international press, was in fact revelatory of an economy of mutual and unextinguished debts without which the entire edifice of Europe would have collapsed long ago. In Milan, a nineteenth-century Franco-German tradition of thought positioning Italy as the originary site for the human voice’s expressive capabilities, and also as the periphery of European democracy, produced, in the early decades of Italian democratic governance, a cross-section of musical phenomena in which languages are spun away from semantics, in the attempt to represent and foster a hearing capable to register sense in all sound. What was being unraveled, along with logos, was any pretense to the public exercise of reason, that belief in limpid communication that grounds the idea of western democracy and its role as the symbolic boundary between Europe and its constitutive outside. At a time when European boundaries are being very concretely thronged by an inflow of migrants and refugees, a time that demands a radical rethinking of the right to, and practice of, national borders, I think of this unworking of language—to use Maurice Blanchot’s stunning

expression—as the drive towards community we are often told to hear in the practice of music.
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