

***La Fabbrica Illuminata* by Luigi Nono.**

Time of Work, Time of Leisure? Time of Conviviality

During a performance of the *Kammersymphonie* Op. 9, Gustav Mahler became enraged as members of the audience shuffled their chairs and, out of boredom, began to leave their seats in a disrespectful manner. Alma Mahler recounts that her husband—likely making more noise than the other attendees—demanded silence, successfully imposed it, and continued applauding until the dissenters had disappeared. Such episodes, which might appear merely as anecdotal curiosities, are in fact indicative of a profound issue concerning, on the one hand, the intelligibility of the artistic medium, and on the other, the transformation of the musical audience and its listening practices—problems also highlighted by Theodor W. Adorno in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*:

[...] the social position of the proletariat within bourgeois society has largely kept workers and their children away from artistic production. [...] The social aversion that has weighed for millennia, particularly on the arts requiring the physical presence of the artist—such as theatre, dance, and music—has significantly restricted, from a sociological perspective, the pool of individuals from which these arts draw their practitioners.¹

The reception of a piece of art thus appears to be linked to a social condition that must be carefully examined in its implications and role if one wishes to fully understand the work itself. If artistic consumption becomes a matter of class—if workers and their children remain distant from artistic production—then the question arises as to where art should be placed within the division proposed by the title of the Winter School: *work* or *leisure*? A productive way to introduce the aforementioned philosophical and political positions into a more literary framework can be found in the reflections presented in *Tecniche della critica letteraria*, where Ezio Raimondi, drawing on Adorno, illustrates how the relationship with public opinion serves as a mirror of class divisions:

[...] the relationship between society and the artistic phenomenon [...] is framed through the demystifying categories of dialectical thought against the backdrop of the process of social alienation between objective spirit and the individual in the late-bourgeois era; and an entire chapter is devoted precisely to the problem of criticism and public opinion, which is tied to

¹ T.W. Adorno, *Introduzione alla sociologia della musica* [1962], trad. it. di G. Manzoni, Einaudi, Torino 1971, p. 69; trad. ndr.

institutions of social control and economic interests that, in the absence of full awareness, determine a "false consciousness," reduced to mere information.²

As Raimondi states in the passage cited above, Adorno employs dialectical thought to analyse and demystify the relationship between society and artistic production: the contradictions and tensions within society and culture reveal how late-capitalist bourgeois society has led to the increasing alienation of the individual from culture. In Italy, this phenomenon was particularly evident in the poetic environment, where the audience became increasingly marginal, eventually being almost entirely absorbed by popular music. A striking example of this shift was the celebrated yet ultimately unsuccessful attempt to bring poetry to a wider audience at the Castelporziano Poetry Festival (1969), where attendees were enticed with the promise of seeing Patti Smith—who, of course, never appeared: a resounding failure.

In this shift of audience, of the poetry audience towards more popular music, something rather intriguing is perhaps revealed: an apparent opposition between experimentalism and expressiveness emerges from these episodes of reception and Adornian analyses. However, this relationship may not be so easily resolved, and the binary of *work* and *leisure* itself seems to require reconsideration.

A particularly significant example through which this issue can be explored is *La Fabbrica Illuminata* by Luigi Nono. This work is emblematic in its convergence of renewed technical instrumentation and political ideals, forming an artistic manifesto of communist inspiration in solidarity with the working class. Nono developed the project in direct dialogue with the workers of the Italsider steel plant in Genoa-Cornigliano, seeking to understand and convey the impact of the industrial environment on their daily lives. The genesis of this work was therefore not a mere compositional exercise or a simple representation of factory labour, but rather an inquiry into the human dynamics within the industrial context, with particular attention to the workers' psycho-physical reactions.

The discussions that followed with the workers are particularly significant: their willingness and ability to understand why and how music can embody themes of working-class life and struggle, their desire to grasp the technical aspects of the compositional process, from the formulation of the poetic text—based in this case on phrases from the workers themselves, fragments of union contracts, and the poetic invention and montage of the young Venetian poet Giuliano Scabia. The workers, often and almost entirely devoid of formal academic training in music and culture, were, in contrast, constantly exposed to the mass consumption of escapist radio broadcasts and

² E. Raimondi, *Tecniche della critica letteraria*, Einaudi, Torino 1967, pp. 42-43; trad. ndr.

popular songs. Yet, by virtue of their very work and lives, they were compelled to remain at the forefront of technical advancements—new means of production, new modes of labour. Significantly, it was the technical analysis, rather than the aesthetic one, that became the vehicle for their understanding: the working and compositional processes in the electronic studio, as well as the phonetic and semantic analysis of the text in its transformation into music, were readily comprehended by them. For these workers, the relationship between sound and noise, that is, the specific sonic structure of the acoustic phenomenon, did not constitute the same problem—whether real or contrived—that it did for a predominantly bourgeois audience accustomed to the traditional concert hall. A constant feature of their reactions was: “Listening to this music, composed from our own sounds-noise and our own words, we become aware of our alienated condition in the factory. We work like mechanised robots, almost without perceiving any longer the human sound aggression. Now, we rediscover it and regain awareness of it—even through music”.³

The workers’ familiarity with the sounds of the factory and their realisation of the significance these sounds acquire once recontextualised and reworked—once integrated into a musical discourse—is clearly reflected in their own words: “Listening to this music [...] we become aware of our alienated condition in the factory. [...] Now, we rediscover it and regain awareness of it—even through music”. This response indicates the *Zusammenhang* (coherence, interconnection) and *Wechselwirkung* (reciprocal interaction) by which noises attain their meaning not merely because they originate from a particular tool or machine, but because they are placed within a specific context; they are the sounds of the factory. As further proof of this, when the workers discussed Nono’s work, they did not focus on any perceived inaccuracy of the sound itself—such as distortions, electronic manipulations, or editing processes—but rather on a reduced power compared to what they were accustomed to. In other words, they felt that the sound did not adequately reflect its relationship with the “the human sound aggression”.⁴ As Nono recounted in an interview with Hansjörg Pauli: “They later objected that the noises in my piece, *La Fabbrica Illuminata*, were far weaker than those they were used to”.⁵

³ L. Nono, *La nostalgia del futuro. Scritti e colloqui scelti 1948-1989*, a cura di De Benedictis, Angela Ida, Rizzardi, Veniero, il Saggiatore, Milano 2019, pp. 293-94; trad. ndr.

⁴ The “the human sound aggression” also has technical implications: from the twentieth century to the present, music has become increasingly faster. John Shore’s tuning fork (1711) had a frequency of 423.5 Hz. Over time, this frequency has fluctuated, influenced both by musicians’ aesthetic sensibilities and by technological advancements. More robust and resonant instruments, now suited to the vast spaces of modern concert halls, produce a louder and more powerful music.

⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 339-340; trad. ndr.

The fidelity to the working-class context is undeniable even at the textual level. This is evident, for instance, in a typescript by Giuliano Scabia, where certain modifications to the verses include annotations by Nono himself: “We must always be careful not to get the tone or tension wrong; otherwise, we risk falling into journalistic propaganda, into the ridiculous, and into the obvious”⁶. If preserving the tone and tension of the factory means remaining faithful to its significance within context—where *tension* is, in this sense, a particularly evocative term—then failing to do so would mean distorting it. The proposed approach, therefore, consists in bringing language back to ideas, the sounds of the factory back into the discourse of the factory, drawing from idioms, leaflets, and cartoons circulating among the workers.

Deemed too polemical towards the company to be presented at the Italsider festival as originally planned, the composition was instead performed at the Venice Biennale. A delegation of workers attended the performance and—Nono recalls—remained until the following morning discussing not the messages of the work, but its concreteness, in conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre, Massimo Mila, PCI cultural director Rossana Rossanda, and Nono himself.⁷ The workers then requested a subsequent meeting in Genoa to delve deeper into the technical tools used in the composition. Nono testified to the importance of this new meeting, which became an opportunity for learning and exchanging ideas about his compositional techniques: “It was much more difficult to talk to them than to give a nice musicology lecture in Darmstadt. But that meeting was extremely valuable to me because I learned a great deal”⁸.

The two meetings following the performance are, in my view, the most interesting aspect of the work, as they allow for a re-examination of the Adornian positions cited at the beginning of this paper. On these occasions, the workers and their lives were not kept distant from artistic production: they actively participated in the creation, representation, and political and technical critique. This is significant because it demonstrates that an audience socially distanced from technically complex art can engage with it and even contribute to its creation. For this reason, the entire episode—the piece of art alone would not suffice—of *La Fabbrica Illuminata* serves as a dismantling of Adorno's concept of *Beherrschung* (domination): workers and philosophers, ultimately individuals, perhaps experienced in dialogue, in the creation of a *convivial* moment, a moment of *natura naturans*, where the irrationality of their hidden and denied condition

⁶ L. Nono, *La fabbrica illuminata*, 1964 (composizione), Fondazione Archivio Luigi Nono ONLUS, Venezia, 27.05/12; trad. ndr.

⁷ Cfr. L. Nono, *La nostalgia del futuro. Scritti e colloqui scelti 1948-1989*, cit., Milano 2019, p. 56; trad. ndr.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 57; trad. ndr.

within capitalist society was revealed as a *naturata*. In this way, “art represents a truth in a dual sense: it both captures the image of its purpose, buried beneath rationality, and simultaneously proves that the existing state is guilty of its own irrationality, of its senselessness”.⁹ The continuous dialogue that educated both the workers and Nono together is fundamentally a process of learning towards a shared utopia; the concreteness of the piece of art, coupled with the fact that it was discussed—that is, its reception—leads to a moment in which critical demands against the prevailing rationality emerge in a dialectical form that exposes the arbitrariness of *Beherrschung*. It is a moment of revealing *Ungleichzeitigkeit*¹⁰ (non-simultaneity) in which the ghettoizing classification that sees the proletariat confined to the “time of work”¹¹ ceases to function. The capitalist synthesis proposes an incompatibility between *time of work* and *time of leisure*, according to which working life and resting life are to be lived in separate times, or even in a strict *aut aut*.

La Fabbrica Illuminata represents a utopian space-time, not as an escape, but as a concrete critique and denunciation of existing conditions and, in contrast, as an image of what could be. In this regard, the political project of transforming the world into another world might be comparable to the artistic project of transfiguring the world into another world. Framing an ontology of what *is*, that is, the condition of the workers in the factory, also defines an ontology of the *not yet being*, of the *Noch-nicht-Sein*.

The alienation of art, then, must be understood as an alienation from the prevailing time, from the time of the rational, and ultimately from the *time of work*. This is why it resides in the irrational, in the obscure, and in the nocturnal;¹² but in response to Maurice Blanchot's concept of the nocturnal, from which art originates, one might counter with: “Doch eben, die Menschen träumen nicht nur nachts, durchaus nicht”¹³. Art thus becomes the announcement of a utopian future in the present and in consciousness. It embodies a philosophy of praxis, consisting of the pre-appearance of the new praxis in utopian form, the appearance of daydreams in

⁹ T.W. Adorno, *Teoria estetica* [1970], trad. it. di Giovanni Matteucci, Einaudi, Torino 2009, p. 73; trad. ndr.

¹⁰ Cfr. E. Bloch, M. Ritter, *Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics*, «New German Critique», Spring, 1977, vol. 11, Duke University Press Spring, 1977, pp. 22-38.

¹¹ “[...] human relations designed to speed up time” «[...] relazioni umane per accelerare i tempi», “[...] how many MAN-MINUTES to die?” «[...] quanti MINUTI-UOMO per morire?» are the lines from Scabia's texts.

¹² The abuse of the factory becomes emblematic in the third episode, *Giro del letto*, where it even comes to dominate the sleep of the workers.

¹³ “But precisely, people do not only dream at night, not at all” Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt 1979, p. 96; trad. ndr.

consciousness as a function of rationality, destined to transform the utopian margins of desire into an emancipatory praxis.

The Blochian vision, which brings humanity's dream into the world, into the *diurnal*, and sees dialectics as a tool to overcome domination through participatory confrontation, helps advance the reflection: it is now possible, while maintaining Adorno's perspective, to consider a piece of art not only as an aesthetic object, but also as a convivial and transformative experience, an element embodied precisely in the dialogue between Nono and the workers. Thinking about art in the *diurnal* also allows one to approach the supposed uselessness of art from a more engaging perspective: the idea of placing art within a specific temporal framework, the notion that there should be times when art is professed as useless, does not so much affirm its absurdity, but rather highlights Adorno's position of its uselessness in the current society. Thus, even the discourse on means, often sterilized into a technical discussion wherein art is seen as mere empty technique, is repositioned within society. Indeed, it is their placement at the center of artistic reflection that constitutes one of the issues of art:

In the rationalization of means, the *telos* of their fetishization is also placed aesthetically, as everywhere. The purer the disposition of them, the more they objectively tend to become ends in themselves. This, not the abandonment of certain anthropological invariants or the sentimentally deplored loss of innocence, constitutes what is fatal in the recent line of development. To goals, i.e., to creations, their possibilities intervene; schemes of works, something empty, replace the works themselves: hence the indifferent. These schemes become, with the strengthening of subjective reason in art, something subjectively devised, i.e., independent of the creation itself, something arbitrary. [...] This is what is false in the loss of meaning. Just as in the concept of meaning itself one must distinguish what is true from what is false, so there exists also a false sunset of meaning.¹⁴

The Adornian sunset of false meaning is, in fact, the problem of the biologization¹⁵ and technicalization of art. Schoenberg's dodecaphony, an important reference (and father-in-law!)

¹⁴ T.W. Adorno, *Teoria estetica* [1970], cit., Einaudi, Torino 2009, pp. 401-2; trad. ndr.

¹⁵ Reducing the issue to biological factors brings with it the same sterility: the problem with the voice is *schizophrenia*; for we know that the vocal cords are muscles, but we do not know what the voice is, nor where it comes from: "After the era of the phonograph, that of the telephone. No longer the 'voice that is preserved,' even after the disappearance of the emitter, but (a radical scandal) the possibility of hearing at a distance the vibration of a φωνή without ever seeing the body that generates it. The myth of Echo, the nymph 'made of pure voice,' is daily revived." C. Bologna, *Flatus vocis. Metafisica e antropologia della voce*, il Mulino, Bologna 2000, p. 133; trad. ndr.

for Nono, is not interesting for the twelve-tone system in itself, but rather because "with it, eternity must resign itself and yield before the intranscendence of the ephemeral".¹⁶ Otherwise, Schoenberg himself would not have expressed himself in such terms in his *Harmony Handbook*:

The student must learn the laws and possibilities of tonality as if it were in full force, but must also know the movements that lead to its elimination. The conditions of the system's dissolution are contained in those very conditions that determine it. And in everything that lives, there is what changes, develops, and destroys life. Life and death are contained in the same seed, and in between is only time, that is, nothing essential, but only a measure that eventually fills up. From this example, one must learn what is eternal: change; and what is temporal: existence.¹⁷

For technique to have meaning, the *telòs* of technique must thus be beyond technique, beyond the Promethean¹⁸ end of art. Here lies one of the issues with reception embedded in the sectorial division of *time of work* and *time of leisure*: the supposed professionalization of the artist through technique and the prejudice that a work of art is understandable only to experts are, in themselves, effects of the decline of meaning and classist elements that make art consumption exclusive and excluding of certain classes. In this way, technical mastery becomes the barrier to access, not only to a sense shrouded in cultural superiority but even to the creative moment itself. With the conception of art as a product, there also comes a *savoir-faire*, a competence in tools that is foreign to those who do not engage with art. This transforms the need for artistic learning into that of artistic education, turning artistic education into a commercialized commodity—and this is an abuse: "The principal source of injustice in our epoch is political approval for the existence of tools that by their very nature restrict to a very few the liberty to use them in an autonomous way"¹⁹.

The use of magnetic tape and electronics, the integration of human voice and industrial sounds, the difficulty of listening and the complexity of the structure, and the radical nature of the musical language are all elements that strongly contribute to the technical complexity of *La Fabbrica Illuminata*; yet, it is a testimony that even advanced technicalities can be tools at the service of human relationships and collective growth, rather than alienating productivity. And yet, it did not remain confined to a specialist audience, thanks in part to Nono's own approach:

¹⁶ M. Donà, *Filosofia della musica*, Bompiani, Milano 2006, p. 134; trad. ndr.

¹⁷ A. Schönberg, *Manuale di armonia* [1922], il Saggiatore, Milano 1963, p. 37; trad. ndr.

¹⁸ Cfr. I. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Harper&Row, New York 1972.

¹⁹ I. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, Marion Boyars, London 2009, p. 53.

[...] in any case, the material must never be an end in itself; under no circumstances should the elaborated material [...] present itself as the final result alone. [...] The necessary experimental moment [...] prepares the moment of consciousness, the moment of rationalization, the moment of composition.²⁰

In this ability to speak to a context that, according to prejudices, it would not have been able to communicate with, there must be something capable of overcoming the rejectiveness of technique. Perhaps, then, the problem is no longer rationalisation, but institutionalisation; not the abstraction of art against empiricism, but the concreteness that makes it an expression and part of life.

To resolve the problem of reception, in contrast to Adorno's somewhat distant and academic reading,²¹ we should place alongside it Illich's conviviality, which can be understood as an attempt to bring art back to being something more immediately social, even in terms of the accessibility of its means. In opposition to the alienating productivity of the industrial system, conviviality values shared time and reflective learning: music thus becomes a space for lived community, where the division between work and leisure time is hermeneutically far less relevant than the division created by institutionalisation, which instead leads to questions about who participates and who is involved in and by the work.

Indeed, the first performance scheduled for the Prix Italia in 1964 was censored: RAI refused to broadcast it, deeming it too politically provocative. The workers from Italsider, however, went in delegation to the halls of the former Convent of San Leonardo, not because it was leisure or work, but because it concerned them, because they were participants. The conflict in play is between the education of RAI and the learning of the workers.

The transformation of learning into education paralyzes man's poetic ability, his power to endow the world with his personal meaning. Man will wither away just as much if he is deprived of

²⁰ Stated by Luigi Nono in M. Pellarin, *Luigi Nono. Infiniti possibili*, Kublai Film, Italia 2024, mm. 22:56-23:25; trad. ndr.

²¹ The final and troubled years of Adorno's life, spent sadly in the struggle against the 1968 occupations, somewhat testify to this. It is not surprising, then, that he defines aesthetic success based on how much a work "is or isn't able to awaken the content precipitated into form" (T.W. Adorno, *Teoria estetica* [1970], cit., Torino 2009, p. 188; trad. ndr.); naturally, there is an appreciation for the detachment of the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements. This perhaps represents the social commitment of Adornian art: no commitment to the dictates of a society that led to Auschwitz? And yet today, a new society still exists, and we must still reflect on it.

nature, of his own work, or of his deep need to learn what he wants and not what others have planned that he should learn.²²

Through a piece of art they could learn, and in fulfilling the desire for learning, the creation of the poetic is echoed in the attempt to give one's own sense to the world, the creation of the world-I against the world-other, and the ensuing discussion of domination. For this to happen, art should not be received as education, which is an imposition, but, as in the case of *La Fabbrica Illuminata*, as learning.

Replacing the time of work and time of leisure with the time of participation or alienation helps to better frame the social aspects that would otherwise be more obscure. As recorded by Scabia and Nono, the factory context invades and shapes the working-class lexicon, acting directly on linguistic creativity, and therefore on the possibility of the poetic self's affirmation. To the language of "MINUTES-MAN" where man cannot poetically rethink himself in the world, where he cannot express himself, because he is not *man poietês*, it is necessary to oppose another language, to challenge and discuss the world that the previous language has generated:

The operating code of industrial tools encroaches on everyday language and reduces the poetic self-affirmation of men to a barely tolerated and marginal protest. The consequent industrialization of man can be inverted only if the convivial function of language is recuperated, but with a new level of consciousness. Language which is used by a people jointly claiming and asserting each person's right to share in the shaping of the community becomes, so to speak, a second-order tool to clarify the relationships of a people to engineered instrumentalities.²³

It is then easy to support the interpretation of *La Fabbrica Illuminata* as an attempt to give a voice to the workers: the poetic action of the work is to create a community that listens to it, recognizes itself in it, and draws from it a new capacity for expression through the mix of Carla Henius's voice and the factory noises. The noises of the factory are the shared experience, the sounds of the working world; art is not limited to representing reality or abstractly trying to escape from it or oppose it: let us set aside theories in the attempt to become an actual agent of social transformation. The tension that emerges between the critical potential of the work and the complexity of the electronic production means is thus eased through participation. Rethinking the relationship of enjoyment in its social function means rediscovering its concrete benefits: the sense of belonging, the creation of a community, and the overcoming of alienation.

²² I. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, cit., London 2009, p. 72.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 106.

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