

*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<sup>1</sup> 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 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.<sup>2</sup>

The reception of a piece of art thus appears to be tied to a social condition; consequently, its development and role become fundamental aspects capable of shedding light on both the work itself and the surrounding social context. If reception were to prove to be a matter of class—if workers and their children were distanced from artistic production due to their occupational roles—then the division of time proposed by the Winter School, between work and leisure, would seem to form an oppositional dichotomy: the quintessential worker, the labourer, does not partake in art, which is relegated to an unfamiliar realm of leisure time. The philosophical and political positions mentioned above also find resonance in more literary analyses. For example, in *Techniques of Literary Criticism*, referring specifically to Adorno, Ezio Raimondi illustrates how the relationship with public opinion reflects the divergences between social classes:

[...] 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

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<sup>1</sup> Someone might observe that perhaps it was the execution that was disrespectful to them.

<sup>2</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Introduzione alla sociologia della musica* [1962], trad. it. di G. Manzoni, Einaudi, Torino 1971, p. 69; trad. ndr.

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 institutions of social control and economic interests that, in the absence of full awareness, determine a "false consciousness," reduced to mere information.<sup>3</sup>

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.

Arguing in this way, however, the relationship of alienation would ultimately seem reversible: perceiving poetry as complex and distant from both themselves and the world, its audience turns instead to a more popular and direct form of music.<sup>4</sup> Whether it is the audience—confined within a late-capitalist world—that fails to recognise free art, which distances itself from that world, or whether it is art itself, absorbed in self-reflection, that has lost its content, is not immediately clear. However, something intriguing emerges alongside the work-leisure dichotomy: an apparent opposition between experimentalism and expressiveness.

A particularly significant example through which this issue can be explored is *La Fabbrica Illuminata* by Luigi Nono. This piece 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.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Raimondi, *Tecniche della critica letteraria*, Einaudi, Torino 1967, pp. 42-43; trad. ndr.

<sup>4</sup> This position assumes that the shift from poetry to music is merely a transfer, not a decline. I believe the Romantic notion of a hierarchy of the arts—where music was placed at the top—can now be set aside.

Too controversial towards the company to be presented at the Italsider celebration as planned, the first performance, scheduled for the 1964 Prix Italia, was censored: RAI refused to broadcast it, considering it too provocative. The composition was then exhibited at the Biennale in the halls of the former convent of San Leonardo. The Italsider workers arrived in delegation for 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.<sup>5</sup> 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’<sup>6</sup>.

The two meetings following the performance are, in my view, one of the most interesting aspects of the art piece, 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 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’.<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr. L. Nono, *La nostalgia del futuro. Scritti e colloqui scelti 1948-1989*, cit., Milano 2019, p. 56; trad. ndr.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 57; trad. ndr.

<sup>7</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Teoria estetica* [1970], trad. it. di Giovanni Matteucci, Einaudi, Torino 2009, p. 73; trad. ndr.

exposes the arbitrariness of *Beherrschung*. It is a moment of revealing *Ungleichzeitigkeit*<sup>8</sup> (nonsynchronism) in which the ghettoizing classification that sees the proletariat confined to the *time of work*<sup>9</sup> 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 *Noch-nicht-Sein* (not yet being).

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;<sup>10</sup> 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'<sup>11</sup>. 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 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 *Diurne*, and sees dialectics as a tool to overcome domination through participatory confrontation, allows us to consider, while maintaining Adorno's argument, a piece of art not only as an aesthetic object, but also as a convivial and transformative experience. It happened precisely in the dialogue between Nono and the workers. Thinking about art in the *Diurne* also allows one to approach the supposed uselessness of art from a more engaging perspective: the idea of placing art within

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> '[...] 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> '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.

a specific temporal framework, the notion that there should be times when art is professed as useless, does not affirm its absurdity, but rather highlights Adorno's position of its uselessness in 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.<sup>12</sup>

The Adornian sunset of false meaning is, in fact, the problem of the biologization<sup>13</sup> and technicalization of art. Schoenberg's dodecaphony, an important reference (and father-in-law!) 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'.<sup>14</sup> 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

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<sup>12</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Teoria estetica* [1970], cit., Einaudi, Torino 2009, pp. 401-2; trad. ndr.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> M. Donà, *Filosofia della musica*, Bompiani, Milano 2006, p. 134; trad. ndr.

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.<sup>15</sup>

For technique to have meaning, the *télos* of technique must thus be beyond technique, beyond a Promethean<sup>16</sup> end of art. Here is one of the problems of reception, embedded in the sectoral division of time between work and leisure: the supposed professionalisation of the artist through technique and the prejudice that a piece of art can only be understood by experts are, in themselves, effects of the decline of meaning and classist elements that make the enjoyment of art both exclusive and excluding. As a result, technical mastery becomes not only a barrier to accessing a meaning 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, and then 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’<sup>17</sup>.

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:

[...] 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.<sup>18</sup>

The proof that Nono's intentions were successful, the proof that even a complex technique was not excluding, lies in the nature of the discussions between Nono and the workers:

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<sup>15</sup> A. Schönberg, *Manuale di armonia* [1922], il Saggiatore, Milano 1963, p. 37; trad. ndr.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. I. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Harper&Row, New York 1972.

<sup>17</sup> I. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, Marion Boyars, London 2009, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Stated by Luigi Nono in M. Pellarin, *Luigi Nono. Infiniti possibili*, Kublai Film, Italia 2024, mm. 22:56-23:25; trad. ndr.

The discussions that followed with the workers were highly significant: a willingness and ability to understand why and how music could embody themes of working-class life and struggle, along with a desire to grasp the technical process of composition—from the formulation of the poetic text, based in this case on phrases from the workers themselves, fragments of trade union contracts, and the inventive poetic montage by the young Venetian poet Giuliano Scabia. The workers: often almost entirely without academic musical or cultural education, and indeed subjected to the relentless bombardment of escapist consumption through radio and popular songs. However, they were compelled, due to their own lives and work, to be at the cutting edge of technology—new methods of production, new tools of labour. Here: rather than aesthetic analysis, it was technical analysis that became the vehicle for their understanding. The working and compositional processes within the Electronic Studio, the phonetic and semantic analysis of the text in relation to its transformation into music—these were easily grasped by them. The relationship between sound and noise, that is, the specific sonic structure of the acoustic phenomenon, did not pose the same problem for them (whether real or artificially constructed) as it often did for a predominantly bourgeois concert hall audience.<sup>19</sup>

The key point: the very technique that should have been an obstacle for the workers instead became a subject of discussion and engagement—technique over aesthetics. Perhaps, then, the issue is no longer the rationalisation of art but its institutionalisation; not abstraction versus empiricism, but the concreteness that makes it an expression of and a part of life. That's why, to resolve the problem of reception, in contrast to Adorno's somewhat distant and academic reading,<sup>20</sup> I believe it is appropriate to invoke Illichian conviviality here, as it relates to the attempt to restore art to something more immediately social. In contrast 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 us to ask: who takes part in the art piece, and who is engaged by it? The real

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<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

conflict is not between technique and the audience; rather, the opposing sides are the education and politics of RAI and Italsider versus the workers' own learning and self-reflection:

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 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.<sup>21</sup>

Art should not be received as education—an imposition, which is what the institution wanted—but as learning, which is what the workers desired. Through the work, the workers could learn themselves, and in fulfilling their desire for learning, the poetic creation resounds—the attempt to give personal meaning to the world, to create a world-self against the world-other, and, consequently, to challenge domination. This is why the poetic operation carried out by Nono and Scabia is so significant: the factory's context invades and shapes the workers' lexicon, directly influencing linguistic creativity and, therefore, the possibility of poetic self-affirmation. Faithfully recording the language of the factory thus becomes essential: 'We must always be careful not to get the tone or tension wrong; otherwise, we risk falling into propagandistic journalism, into the ridiculous and the obvious'<sup>22</sup>. If preserving the tone and tension of the factory means remaining faithful to its meaning within context—tension in this sense is an especially evocative term—then failing to do so means distorting it. Language must be brought back into ideas, the sounds of the factory into the discourse of the factory, drawing from expressions, flyers, and cartoons that circulated among the workers. Through the exposure of language, through the poetic, comes the realisation that the noises they are accustomed to are not elements of *natura naturans*; they are signs of *Zusammenhang* and *Wechselwirkung*—they exist as they do because they are embedded in that context, rather than merely being produced by this or that machine. These are the sounds of the factory. Changing the context of these noises reveals the creation of language:

[...] listening to this music, composed with our own noise-sounds and our own words, we realise our alienated condition in the factory. We work like mechanised robots, almost without even

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<sup>21</sup> I. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, cit., London 2009, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> From a typescript by Giuliano Scabia to Luigi Nono; L. Nono, *La fabbrica illuminata*, 1964 (composizione), Fondazione Archivio Luigi Nono ONLUS, Venezia, 27.05/12.



perceiving anymore the violence of the human sonic environment. Now, we rediscover it and regain awareness of it—even through music.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

It is then easy to refute the absolute opposition between experimentalism and expressiveness. *La Fabbrica Illuminata* is an attempt to give voice to the workers: the poetic action of the work is to create a community that listens to it, recognises itself in it, and draws new expressive capacity from it through the mix of Carla Henius's human 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, nor is it an abstract attempt to escape or oppose it: let us set aside theories on technique to instead understand how a piece of art can become a genuine agent of social transformation. The tension that arises between the critical potential of the work and the complexity of electronic production tools thus eases with participation. Reconsidering the relationship of reception and enjoyment in its social functions means rediscovering the concrete benefits that go far beyond the division between *time of work* and *time of leisure*: a sense of belonging, the creation of a community, and the overcoming of alienation.

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<sup>23</sup> 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, p. 294; trad. ndr.

<sup>24</sup> I. Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, cit., London 2009, p. 106.

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