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Sound Bytes: Experimental Electronic Music and Sound Art in Italy

Arielle Saiber

In Peter Strickland's bold 2012 psycho-thriller film, *Berberian Sound Studio*, a shy British sound engineer, Gilderoy (played by Toby Jones), descends into a swirling madness produced by the screams and hacking-ripping-squishing-smashing sound effects he is asked to manipulate for a 1970s Italian horror film studio.[1] We never see the film he is helping to record (intriguingly titled, *The Equestrian Vortex*); rather we "watch" its sounds. In this analogue production world, Gilderoy and the other foley artists decimate watermelons, cabbages, and other produce with machetes and hammers; women wail in sound booths; and our protagonist gradually comes unhinged. Immersed in the sound of horror and the horror of sound, Gilderoy slowly fuses with the movie he is making: his words by the end of the film are dubbed into Italian. Strickland's film is on the one hand an ambivalent indictment—by turns funny, horrific, and poignant—of shady producers, whose faux intellectualism fails to raise to the level of art their cynical packaging of rape and torture fantasy as profitable entertainment. On the other hand *Berberian Sound Studio* is equally an homage to Italy's splatter films from the 1960s and '70s, a tribute to the invisible and complex work of sound engineers and the art of eliciting affect through acoustical manipulation. It is also a nod to famed composers such as Bruno Maderna (1920-1973), Ennio Morricone (b. 1928), and Angelo Badalamenti (b. 1937), who scored horror and thriller soundtracks (as well as blockbusters, art films, and television productions); to the Italian prog rock band Goblin, who contributed the terrifying, iconic soundtracks to Dario Argento's *Profondo Rosso* and *Suspiria*; and perhaps to the 1970s psychedelic-electro-rock collective, Insieme Musica Diversa. Even this film's title contributes to a thick tissue of sound reference, recalling the singular art of American soprano and avant-garde performer Cathy Berberian (1925-1983), the wife of composer Luciano Berio (1925-2003) who was renowned for her wide and wild range of human, animal, and onomatopoeic vocalizations.

Italian mastery in the field of sound design is long-standing, from the keyboard and string instruments of Lorenzo Gusnasco da Pavia (d. circa 1517), to the renowned violins of the Stradivari family, to Russolo's Intonarumori, to one of Pink Floyd's favorite instruments: the Farfisa electric organ.[2] Today's sound art and experimental music (acoustic, electronic, electro-acoustic, and field recordings)—not only in Italy but around the world—can locate one of their most important pioneers in the Futurist Luigi Russolo (1883-1947), who made frequent appearances in this topic issue, but also in many other

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[1] *Berberian Sound Studio*, directed and written by Peter Strickland (Warp X and Illuminations Films, 2012), DVD (MPI Home Video, 2013).

[2] Farfisa is an acronym for the electronics company "FAbbriche Riunite di FISArmoniche." In the 1960s and '70s Farfisa made relatively inexpensive, portable, electric combo organs that became very popular in psychedelic rock, funk, punk, and new wave.

Italian artists and collectives.[3] To name but a few early and mid-twentieth-century Italian sound innovations: the mysterious, spiritual, mono-tone manipulations of Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988); the avant-garde works of Luciano Berio (1925-2003), Maderna, Morricone, Luigi Nono (1924-1990), and Salvatore Sciarrino (b. 1947); the computer music of Pietro Grossi (1917-2002) and Enore Zaffiri (b. 1928); the *musique concrète* and electronic experiments of the Studio di Fonologia Musicale di Radio Milano (founded in 1955); the early minimalist work of Luciano Cilio (1950-1983); the collaborations of the Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza (formed in 1964); Franco Battiato's electronic experiments in the 1970s; the chilling and at times painful industrial "noise" and drone explorations of Maurizio Bianchi (b. 1955); the improvisational sounds of MEV (Musica Elettronica Viva, formed in 1966 in Rome); and the visionary productions of Giorgio Moroder (b. 1940), who is often cited as the first to use an entirely synthesized backing track in a pop hit (Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" [1977]).

Moroder's innovation launched the electronic dance music craze, as well as the post-punk scene, with subgenres such as Italo-disco and Italian synth wave that continue to attract cult followings.[4] What Moroder says in a sample on French electronic music duo Daft Punk's album *Random Access Memory* (Columbia, 2013), could serve for many visionary (acousticary?) sound artists: when he discovered the synthesizer in 1969-1970, he says, he knew he had heard "the sound of the future."[5]

From the cries of an infernal Plutus and Nimrod, to *poesia maccheronica* and the gibberish of Dario Fo's *grammelot*; from Adriano Celentano's blues-rockish "Prisencolinensinainciusol" (1972) to the playful microsound-glitches created by Massimiliano Sapienza (a.k.a. Massimo) in *Var* (Fällt, 2000)—with titles such as "window.setInterval("myFunction()", 15000)"—and the intriguing, experimentalist techno of Retina.it in *Randomicon* (2011), the Italian tower of Babel is quite aware of the subversiveness of sound. Perhaps this twisty and twisted humor, and this celebration of the unexpected and even potential unpleasantness of sound—as scholar and composer Kim Cascone discussed in his important essay on the "Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music"[6]—is what inspired architects Willem Jan Neutelings and Michiel Riedijk in designing the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision. They based the building on Dante's three realms of the afterlife, with *Inferno*'s

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[3] The Orchestra of Futurist Noise Intoners, *Intonarumori*, conducted by Luciano Chessa (Sub Rosa 2013), recently reconstructed Russolo's noise-generating devices and revived his opus.

[4] See, for example, *Italo Disco: Essential Italian Disco Classics 1977-1985* released by the British label Strut in 2008 and *Danza Meccanica: Italian Synth Wave (1981-1987)* vol. 2 released by the Berlin label Mannequin in 2013. See also Fred Ventura's compilations *Milano New Wave 1980-1983 Redux* (Spittle Records, 2008-2010) and Alessio Natalizia's compilation *Mutazione: Italian Electronic & New Wave Underground 1980-1988* (Strut, 2013). For a sampling of electronic dance music from the late 1990s, IDM (Intelligent Dance Music, to be precise), see the group Entropia's compilation, *Adventures in Eclectic Land Vol. 1* (Eclectic, 2000).

[5] Jonathan Sterne comments, "While 'the gaze,' as an act of seeing, is a central trope in studies of visual culture, there is no central auditory trope equivalent of 'the listen.' In its place, there are dozens of figures and figurations of audition, even though all structures of listening, whether interpersonal, institutional or mediatized are also configurations of power." Extending Sterne's thought, we note that there is no sound-oriented equivalent of the adjective "visionary" to describe those who anticipate futures that come to pass. See Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 19-21.

[6] See Kim Cascone, "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-Digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music," *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (2000): 12-18.

flood of information, sonorous and ophthalmic, and its fiery, bloody reds given prominence.

Recent Italian musicians and sound artists have taken the bewildering bendiness of language even a step further with such devices as word-generating machines. Kevin Molin, for example, created a performance piece in 2013 entitled "Inferno infernale" in which he used Google Translate to morph the first canto of *Inferno*, moving from Italian to Albanian, to Bengali, to Filipino, to Urdu, to Arabic, to Romanian, to Swahili and back again to Italian.[7] To offer another example: Lettera 22, the experimental noise duo Matteo Castro and Riccardo Mazza, is named after the beloved, portable typewriter designed by Marcello Nizzoli in 1950 for Olivetti. Castro and Mazza's compositions record cacophonic, urban chaos of everyday life, layering them with hisses, scratches, and high-pitched frequencies. They reprise analog sound and merge it with the digital, providing an acoustic analogy to the strata of time that are discernible in the historic layers of Italian towns and cities. Listening to Lettera 22's albums reminds us how helpless the ear can be in attempting to filter or block out sounds, and how acoustically comforting or claustrophobic sounds can be.

Another contemporary form of acoustic archeology proliferating in Italy consists of field recordings of the natural and urban environments through new advances in frequency sensor technology and interactive media—Domenico Sciajno, Valerio Tricoli, Fabrizio Mordente (a.k.a. Matter), and Maurizio Martinucci (a.k.a. TeZ) are but a few of the investigators in this realm. Ennio Mazzon (whose recent work has moved from the "real world" to the digital, but who has a piece from 2010 called *Celadon* that emblematizes this arc[8]) and Franz Rosati (who has also been using processed field-recordings, acoustic instruments, and probabilistic algorithms to create generative/audioreactive, visual pieces[9]) are another two artists doing fascinating work in this area.

And there are numerous electronic music collectives, such as AIPS (Archivio Italiano Paesaggi Sonori), self-defined "soundscapers italiani" inspired by R. Murray Schafer's theories on the ecology of sound.[10] The group is compiling an archive of Italy's acoustic landscape, with entries such as train routes (like the one in Emilia Romagna that inspired John Cage in the 1970s), urban gardens in Florence, audiowalks along Rovegno's Fonte del Galletto, and Geowalk soundtracks that respond to movement and evolve as listeners saunter through Ancona. Another newly forged interactive sound interface is Bruno Zamborlin's Mogees, which consists of a contact-microphone and a gesture recognition program working together so that any surface on which the microphone is placed becomes an instrument one can "play."[11] A different approach to interactive sound technology was recently created by composer and sound artist Sciajno, one of the most prolific and revered artists working in experimental sound in Italy today. His app *Sonic Shuffle*, released in November of 2013, consists of forty-eight sound files by as many sound

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[7] Kevin Molin, "Inferno Infernale" https://soundcloud.com/kwmolin/inferno-infernale.

[8] See Ennio Mazzon, *Celadon* (Impulsive Habit, 2010), which opens with a recording of the Piave river and builds into a piece filled with processed recordings of electromagnetic interferences: http://impulsivehabitat.com/releases/ihab013.htm.

[9] See Franz Rosati's *Streakline #1* (2013), for example: http://www.franzrosati.com/streakline-1/.

[10] For information about the archive and the field recordings gathered so far, see AIPS's interactive map of Italy: http://www.archivioitalianopaesaggisonori.it/archivio/archivio

[11] Bruno Zamborlin's http://www.brunozamborlin.com/home/

artists that listener-users can manipulate and combine to create a unique "score" and listening experience each time.[12]

The collaborative nature of many experimental sound artists, musicians, instruments, tools, and listeners often gravitates toward the dynamics of a laboratory. Electronic music artist and sound track composer Teho Teardo, for example, explored a "transatlantic collaboration" with cellist Erik Friedlander in their album inspired by Pier Paolo Pasolini's poetry.[13] Milan's Otolab is another good example. Founded in 2001 by musicians, djs, vjs, artists, web designers, graphic designers and architects as a space in which to perform, hold workshops, and lead seminars, Otolab remains committed to the "free circulation of knowledge and experimentation."[14] Galleries displaying sound art, such as the Sound Art Museum in Rome (which opened in 2005 with an exhibit called "Inaudita" featuring work by famed sound artists such as Stephen Vitiello and the Vito Acconci studio) and Spazioersetti in Udine, have also built on collective efforts and exchange.[15] Internet radio stations like Rome's Radio Arte Mobile;[16] archives of sound artists and art, such as Sinewaves; and widely-read online magazines/communities in the digital arts, like Britain's Fluid Radio with Gianmarco Del Re's active coverage of sound experimentation in Italy, [17] the prodigious Chain D.L.K. started by Marc Urselli in the early 1990s,[18] Nicola Catalano's "Battiti" experimental music show on Radio 3,[19] and Mario Biserni's (a.k.a Etero Genio's) heavily Italian-focused Sands zine[20] are equally part of the collaboration process of today's Italian sound artists. The name of Marco Messina's sound studio, Mousikelab, emblematizes the current scientific, experimental nature of much electronically (and electro-acoustically) generated sound collaborations.[21]

Yet with electronic-based music and art, many collectives are no longer "labs" in the spatial sense. They can be conglomerates of people across the globe. Perhaps this world-wide, simultaneous experience of digital sound is one reason why Italy's iXem Festival (italian eXperimental)—the yearly gathering dedicated to the performance of experimental music, media, art, and technology that ran from 2004 to 2012—is no longer taking place. Luckily, excellent experimental music labels, such as Emanuele Carcano's Alga Marghen, Bruno Stucchi and Fabio Carboni's Die Schachtel, Alessandro Tedeschi's Glacial Movements, Giuseppe Ielasi's Senufo, and Domenico Sciajno and Valerio Tricoli's Bowindo are alive and well, dedicated to keeping the scene flush with fascinating sounds, as well as celebrating superb, recent Italian electronic musicians and sound experimenters, like Tu m' (Emiliano Romanelli and Rossano Polidoro, and Andrea Gabriele [1999-2002]), Sparkle in Grey (Matteo Uggeri, Alberto Carozzi, Cristiano Lupo, and Franz Krostopovic), Mugen (Alessandro Canova), Andrea Belfi, Maurizio and Elio Martusciello, Alessandro

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[12] See Domenico Sciajno's app, *Sonic Shuffle*:
http://www.sonicshuffle.net/TheAppRelease/The_App_Release.html.

[13] http://tehoteardo.com/it/opera/album/giorni-rubati/. See Teho Teardo and Erik Friedlander, *Giorni Rubati* (Bip Hop records, 2006).

[14] Otolab: http://www.otolab.net/.

[15] Spazioersetti: http://www.spazioersetti.it/.

[16] Radio Arte Mobile (RAM): http://live.radioartemobile.it/index.asp.

[17] Fluid Radio: http://www.fluid-radio.co.uk/2009/07/channel-1/.

[18] Chain D.L.K. http://www.chaindlk.com/reviews/index.php?type=music&category=7

[19] See Battiti: Radio 3: http://www.radio3.rai.it/dl/radio3/programmi/PublishingBlock-96d966cc-70e1-4cc4-bac3-358241dd000d.html.

[20] Sands (Sound and Silence) zine: http://www.sands-zine.com/.

[21] For Mousikelab see https://soundcloud.com/mousikelab and http://mousikelab.blogspot.com/.

Bosetti, Eraldo Bernocchi, Adern X (Andrea Piran), Gigi Masin, and Antonio Della Marina.[22]

But even as collective, open-source, technologically-based experimentation can expand our capacity to share and listen widely and deeply to the world around us, sonic surveillance techniques are becoming better and better at listening to *us*, as virtually unseen micro-microphones are now available both to protect the private and to invade it. Like Snapchat and Confide, apps that seek to maintain users' privacy by disintegrating photos or texts after they are viewed, collectives such as Mastrofabbro have thought about the intimacy and ultimate 'capturelessness' of sound. Their "Janvier" piece is an audio-video experiment in how sounds "si distruggono nel momento stesso in cui prendono vita. Una ricerca estrema per amore della libertà."[23] Along the same lines, but with a very different result, is Fabio Perletta's *Atom(s) Entropy* (Farmacia901, 2013). Inspired by the microsound movement and the physics of elementary particle interactions, Perletta uses self-built software, vector graphics, and color to trace the relationship between sound and the invisible.

And while we are talking about the invisible, we should mention the inaudible, and projects like TeZ's collaboration with Honor Harger, "Sideralia #1 Ionosphere," which recorded "low frequency radio signals of the earth's ionosphere perturbated by solar wind" in Latvia;[24] and Christopher Cerrone and The Industry Opera Company's opera for wireless headphones—an "invisible opera"—based on Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili*.[25] Andrea Valle's "Vedute della luna scritte in Braille," which, as Valle writes, "is computer music without any digital sounds in it," is another good example.[26] Valle created an instrument called the Rumentarium and a SuperCollider-based audio program to prompt make-shift percussion instruments (food tins, pots and pans, etc.) to play and punch out a "score" of notes, inspired by Galileo's descriptions of the surface of the moon. Marco Donnarumma is another explorer into the realm of the unheard, in this case, into the muscles of the human body in motion. For "Music for Flesh II" (2011) Donnarumma created the instrument Xth sense, a biophysical interactive technology that can, with a tiny microphone, translate muscle movement from wearable biosensors into digitized sound, which is then composed into music through physical gestures. His "Hypo Chrysos" continues use of this technology and weaves in references to the Sixth Bolgia of the *Inferno* through the use of concrete blocks being pulled in a circle.[27]

Somehow, infernal, sonic horrors have resurfaced yet again in this brief coda about Italian experimental music and sound art. I will not venture to say why this is so at this time. These few pages had the modest aim of spotlighting what some of Italy's new sound innovators are empowering us to hear in, about, and around Italy today. As such, they offer an opening onto the future avenues of Italian sound.

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[22] See Discogs for information about each label/musician/group, and links to their websites: http://www.discogs.com/.

[23] Mastrofabbro's "Janvier": http://www.mastofabbro.org/mastofabbro.html.

[24] Maurizio Martinucci (TeZ) and Honor Harger, "Sideralia #1 Ionosphere" recorded in 2009 at Optofonica Lab and released in 201: http://www.tez.it/works.html.

[25] Christopher Cerrone's "Invisible Opera": http://invisiblecitiesopera.com.

[26] Andrea Valle, "Vedute della luna scritte in braille": http://www.fluid-radio.co.uk/2014/01/andrea-valle/.

[27] Marco Donnarumma, "Hypo Chrysos": http://marcodonnarumma.com/works/hypo-chrysos/.