

«Beltà, poi che t'assenti»: Milva, from Madrigals to Ghosts, in *Gesualdo – Death for Five Voices* by Werner Herzog

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Abstract

This article explores the interrelation between music, image, and narrative in Werner Herzog's cinema through the conceptual metaphor of spectrality. Herzog's films construct an "acoustic vision," where music does not merely accompany images but unlocks their latent meanings, creating a tension between the visible and the audible. From his early linguistic experiments in *Last Words* (1967) and *Precautions Against Fanatics* (1968) to later works such as *Signs of Life* (1968), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), *La Soufrière* (1977), and *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), Herzog's cinema reveals a complex interplay between sound, image, and narrative structure. The study examines how music transforms language into sonic substance and how it shapes visionary, dreamlike, and ecstatic film forms. Special focus is given to *Gesualdo – Death for Five Voices* (1995), where Herzog's investigation of Carlo Gesualdo's avant-garde music and tormented biography exemplifies his ecstatic method. In this experimental documentary, spectrality emerges both through the depiction of Gesualdo's haunted existence and the transmedial performance of Maria D'Avalos' ghost. This spectral figure is embodied by the Italian artist Milva, whose performance transcends simple dramatization: Milva becomes a liminal presence, weaving together historical memory, mythic resonance, and musical interpretation. Through her voice and body, the lost figure of Maria D'Avalos is not only evoked but reanimated within the film's hybrid space between documentary and fiction, thus highlighting the intermedial nature of Herzog's project. The analysis shows how Herzog's use of musical and visual counterpoints generates a dense intermedial texture, blending history, myth, and performance. Ultimately, Herzog's cinema reveals a haunted, visionary poetics rooted in the dynamic synergy of sound and image, where the auditory and the visual are entwined along the same sensory continuum.

Keywords: Werner Herzog; Milva; Cinema and Music; Intermediality; Spectrality.

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1 Acoustic Visions

As Werner Herzog has reiterated in several interviews, not only does the music in his films accompany the images, but it also unlocks their latent meanings. Music and images represent, for Herzog, “two worlds that interpenetrate and speak to each other, interacting to the point of producing something unique, which goes beyond the real, beyond the imagination, that urges one to see more and more deeply, to glimpse the most hidden poetic aspects.” (Paganelli 2008: 135).¹ This revealing procession of atypical visions, both regarding, and of, the world, with their profound sense of the primordial, reaches out towards a disquieting sublime; this characterizes the German director’s poetic vision, based around an unyielding synergy between image and music, which unleashes deeper truths, rendered through dense intermedial textures (Lino 2023).

Within his filmography, the relationship between images and music has occupied a central role ever since his earliest linguistic experiments in *Last Words* (*Letzte Worte*, 1967) and *Precautions Against Fanatics* (*Maßnahmen gegen Fanatiker*, 1968). In these two short films, the words repeated obsessively by the characters facing the camera acquire a hypnotic and alienating rhythm, transforming language into sonic substance.

The transformation of language into music is then explored further in two documentaries shot in the United States. *How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck* (*How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck – Beobachtungen zu einer neuen Sprache*, 1976) explores the frenetic, burbling “song of the auctioneers”, defined as a “new language,” as suggested by the subtitle of the German version of the film.² In *Huie’s Sermon* (*Huie’s Predigt*, 1981), a long, virtually uninterrupted sequence shot accompanies the Reverend Huie Rogers’ sermon in a Brooklyn church, capturing the build-up of his oratory: the relentless rhythm of his words intensifies to the point of becoming a song emanating from another world.

If these brief examples highlight the mesmerising musicality of the words and their liminal dimension (suspended between speech and pure sound, between meaning and auditory abstraction), in other films the relationship between music and image merges deeply with the diegetic dimension, giving rise to unfamiliar film forms, to frenzied, symbolic developments, to dreamlike and ecstatic moods.

In his first feature-length film, *Signs of Life* (*Lebenszeichen*, 1968), music by Chopin is casually overheard by the protagonist Stroszek, a German paratrooper stationed on the island of Kos during World War II, and rouses him from an atavistic passivity, burrowing deeply into his soul and propelling him towards a rebellion that is doomed to fail.

His first impulse, in a long series of extreme and visionary gestures in Herzogian cinema, culminates in a poetically mad act: throwing fireworks, first at the sun and then at the town square, the only result being that of striking an old chair of straw. In *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a film rooted in a deep faith in operatic music (mirroring that in cinema), the protagonist’s frenzied obsession with building an opera house in Iquitos materializes in listening to Enrico Caruso recordings, broadcast from a gramophone rigged up on a steamboat that cruises the rivers of the Amazon rainforest and is later hauled over a mountain in order to join up with another tributary.

Caruso’s³ disembodied voice courses throughout film, weaving a web of visual contrasts: the poetic tenderness of opera is entwined with the stark and ominous silences of the forest, whilst proffering evocative resistance to the fury of the rapids threatening the boat.

In the two examples, the “unpredictable and evil” spirit of Chopin’s music⁴ plagues Stroszek’s soul by bringing to the surface the maddening tension that lingers dormant in the protagonist in an environment seared by aridity and inertia. Similarly, Caruso’s voice fuels Fitzcarraldo’s fevered visions, finding its greatest expression

1. “due mondi che si compenetrano e si parlano, interagiscono fino a produrre qualcosa di unico, che va oltre il vero, oltre l’immaginazione, che spinge a vedere di più e più in profondità, a scorgere gli aspetti poetici più nascosti”.

2. In English: *Observations on a new language*.

3. Interviewed on the subject of *Fitzcarraldo* Herzog relates that the script included the character of Caruso, accompanied by the note: “absent throughout the film (assente in tutto il film)” (Ames 2014: 118).

4. That is what the Polish composer is called by Stroszek’s fellow soldier, who plays a Chopin sonata on the piano. The soldier is played by Florian Fricke, founder of Popol Vuh, an experimental music ensemble that weaves together kraut-rock, psychedelia and sacred influences, and author of numerous soundtracks for Herzog’s films.

in a particularly iconic image in the film: Fitzcarraldo, dressed in white and with his back to the camera, is observing the ship being hauled up the mountain, shrouded in a ghostly mist, as if the dream world haunting the protagonist has emerged from the very lungs of the Amazon rainforest.

The inter-artistic and rapt tension between rebellion and the visionary, between the conventional and the atypical, with which music imbues the structuring of the visible, creates a polarity between the rational form of the image and the ancestral pulse that animates its latent connotations (Dottorini 2022: 70). In this context, the image becomes the domain of tension and evocation triggered directly by the dominance of the temporal dimension intrinsic to music as art; likewise, the image imbues the musical ear with a spatial dimension (Chion 1990). Such reciprocity determines an irrepressible vision, in which the acoustic and visual are arranged along the same sensory channel (Hillman 2012: 184).

This contrapuntal texture underpins the approach of the *disjunctive soundtrack* (Koepnick 2008: 203) that emerges strongly in *La Soufrière* (*La Soufrière - Warten auf eine unausweichliche Katastrophe*, 1977) and *Lessons of Darkness* (*Lektionen in Finsternis*, 1992). The use of Wagner's music in both documentaries responds to two distinct ecstatic impulses: on the one hand, the elation at the failure of an extreme film act, such as filming the imminent eruption of a volcano that has been announced as inevitable; on the other, the sublime moment of apocalyptic devastation, evoked as much by the pictorial continuity between the footage of burning oil wells in the Kuwait desert and the chromatic compositions of the biblically inspired paintings of John Martin (1789-1854), as by the solemn use of Wagnerian music, which is contrasted openly with the mournful scale of the documentary images.

In the present study, the acoustic vision produced by the relationship between narrative, image and sound will be explored through the metaphor of *spectrality* and its many conceptual ramifications. The analysis will focus on *Gesualdo - Death for Five Voices* (*Gesualdo – Tod für fünf Stimmen*, 1995), an experimental documentary dedicated to the late Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa. Here, unlike in the aforementioned films, music becomes the central object of Herzog's ecstatic investigation.

In the film, the issue regarding spectrality is developed by interweaving Gesualdo's visionary talent (the musical style of which was extraordinarily avant-garde for the time) with the legend of a tormented existence, which was reflected strongly in the melodic structure and lyrics of his madrigals. The composer barbarically murdered his wife, Maria D'Avalos, and her lover Fabrizio Carafa and, according to certain legends, he was so obsessed by the betrayal that he tortured his second son to death.

Our analysis aims to explore the issue of spectrality in the film in accordance with a twofold stylistic articulation; on the one hand, the transformation of Gesualdo's spiritual anguish into music, as rendered through the dialectic between the filmic reconstruction of the haunted setting of the castle, in which the composer lived the last years of his existence, and the filming of performances of his madrigals by two ensembles; on the other hand, the reincarnation of the ghost of Maria D'Avalos, as a mediating figure between reality and fiction, and whose reflection helps define the transmedial, artistic identity of Milva, the Italian artist who played the role and gave it body and voice.

2 Of Voices and Spectres

Death for Five Voices finds its place in a phase in Herzog's filmography in which documentary production prevails over fiction. The documentary parallels the explicit display of stylistic artifice already explored in *Lessons of Darkness* (a few years earlier), where images of the devastation of the First Gulf War transform earthly landscapes into visions of an "other," almost alien, planet.

Moreover, *Death for Five Voices* continues along the path laid down by the earlier documentary, *The Transformation of the World into Music* (*Die Verwandlung der Welt in Musik*, 1994), in which the staging of opera at the Bayreuth Festival is observed from peripheral perspectives in an attempt to restore the "materiality" of musical rapture.

However, unlike other documentaries, Gesualdo, as Grosoli and Reiter remark, stages an “impossible encounter” (2016: 134)⁵ between author and subject; in fact, it is Herzog’s first documentary focused on a historical figure. The film is constructed through a series of encounters with witnesses, scholars, musicologists, and eccentric characters (such as the bagpiper or the two cooks), whose stories tread the shifting terrain between documentary impulse and aestheticized construction (particularly marked here) (Cronin 2002: 260-63).

Gesualdo’s presence seems to ooze from the cracks and peeling surfaces in the surviving rooms of the castle where he lived. Eroded by time, crumbling walls, hallways overrun with overgrown vegetation, each element contributing to fixing the past in the ruins of the present. The castle is seen as a haunted space, on which the composer’s obsession and anguish are engraved visually and acoustically, fuelling the unresolved tension that runs throughout the entire film, in which past and present, absence and presence are interwoven according to disjointed and fragmentary logic, in accordance with a device typical of spectrality (Blanco and Peeren 2013: 32).

Death for Five Voices thus explores the posthumous dimension, the afterlife of Carlo Gesualdo, interweaving the retelling of the myth that shrouds the cursed and tormented figure of the composer with footage from performances of his madrigals, particularly those from *Book VI*. The latter are distinguished by dissonant and chromatic melodic structures, as well as lyrics laden with affliction and pain, far from the patterns of the canonical madrigal, as emphasized by the conductors of the two ensembles that perform some of the pieces.

The first three scenes in the film, shot in the castle of Gesualdo, scarred by time and the ravages of the 1980 Irpinia earthquake, introduce the musician’s myth. In the first encounter, outside the castle, a local inhabitant explains the background to this dilapidated state; no one wants to live in the castle, because it is haunted. He describes the main features of Carlo Gesualdo’s complex nature, also adding a few mysterious hints about his death, and his masochistic pleasure in being flogged by a servant who then used to fall asleep on him. Subsequently, a custodian opens the doors of the mansion by quoting one of the most famous verses from Dante’s *Inferno*: “Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate.” Lastly, as the camera explores the decrepit, ramshackle rooms, it tracks the music of a bagpiper, who is convinced he is staving off Gesualdo’s cursed spirit by playing alongside the cracks in the walls.

Herzog’s voice-over, which in this film, unlike his other works, forgoes describing or framing the significance of the images, and merely poses questions to the interviewees, escorting the viewer through a series of encounters with figures poised between invention and reality. This flow of heterogeneous accounts, orchestrated without an apparent structure, evokes the formal structure of the madrigal, where multiple voices are interwoven in a complex polyphony. In this way, the film gradually blurs the boundaries between artifice and authenticity, rendering a vision in which historical documentation and imagination are interpenetrated.

The stylization of biographical elements is entirely logical when compared with the very nature of Gesualdo’s biography, which is presented from the very beginning as a web of invention and reworking. The few available sources, in fact, have already been communicated by additional narrative layers, the product of fantasies and myths. Both during his lifetime and after his death, the madrigalist (even his criminal deeds)⁶ inspired poetry and musical compositions, to the point of becoming the focus of a composition by Stravinsky,⁶ which conclusively elevated his person to the realms of myth.

The investigation regarding the composer does not rely on historical reconstruction, but proceeds through evocation, apparition and voice. Therefore, in the film, multiple voices and testimonies, tales and perceptions, stratify and recompose the spectre of Gesualdo, restoring all the tragic and spectacular load, the pomp and anguish, the rapture and the dastardly. The two cooks, intent on recreating Gesualdo’s sumptuous wedding banquet, conjure up a menu of some 120 courses for thousands of guests; the castle custodian describes Gesualdo’s ruthless fury in cutting down trees in a forest for months on end after carrying out the double murder; reference is made to the composer’s interest in an archeological relic shrouded in mystery, which is comparable to the Discus of Festus, as well as to his interest in alchemy, culminating in the attribution of patronage of

5. “un incontro impossibile”.

6. Several poets from Campania described, in their works, the crime committed by Gesualdo: Ascanio Pignatelli, Horatio Coite, Giambattista Marino and Torquato Tasso (Rogers 2012: 192).

the famed anatomical machines kept in the vault of the Sansevero Chapel in Naples.⁷ All this material imbues the Gesualdo legend with a subversive, occult and demonic element – “L'è un diavolo questo Gesualdo, l'è un diavolo (This Gesualdo is a devil, he's a devil)” – obsessively repeated by the cook intent on recreating the menu for his wedding banquet.

One of the leitmotifs of *Death for Five Voices* is the conjunction of obsession and possession. Musicologist Gerald Place, conductor of the Gesualdo Consort, tells of a scholar, Philip Heseltine (known under the pseudonym Peter Warlock), a composer and occult enthusiast, who became so absorbed in Gesualdo's sublime masterpieces that he went mad and began to believe that he himself was the musician (he later fell into depression and committed suicide).

In another interview, the director of a mental health clinic tells of treating a woman who believed herself to be the ghost of Maria d'Avalos, and of curing two characters who think they are Gesualdo. Thus, possession by an atavistic past characterizes this film, in which field research and a portrayal of a great musician merge with the enjoyment of telling and retelling a story that continues to obsess the modern imagination, even spectralizing the expressive form.

In the film, as Rogers (2012) suggests, the perceptible is constructed around a mannerist logic, or rather, the display of artifice and an inspiration that does not emerge from the natural dimension but directly from the artistic. This approach, which emphasizes Gesualdo's obsessions and anguish through invention and intensification, is contrasted with the transparency of the footage of musical performance. In fact, the stories and exploration of space and environment, carried out by the camera in the castle, are accompanied by footage of performances of the madrigals from *Book VI* by two ensembles, the Complesso Barocco and the Gesualdo Consort. Here, the images are divorced from mythical affabulation; shots are taken employing little camera movement, with a mainly descriptive function and without too much stylization, in order to facilitate the surfacing of the entire spirituality and figurative power of the madrigals developed in the storylines. Intense polyphonic interweavings sustained by counterpoint, emphasize certain words with a powerful expressive value: for example, terms such as “anguish” and “sorrow” are emphasized by the chromatic emphases of the voices in “Beltà, poi che t'assenti,” a madrigal composed a few days before the murder of Maria D'Avalos and her lover.

In the film, the relationship between artifice, myth and spectral presence reaches a climax when it touches on the documentary hallucination with the appearance of the ghost of Maria D'Avalos.

After the performance of “Beltà, poi che t'assenti,” a female voice vibrates as the camera explores the half-light of the castle's abandoned rooms and spaces: peeling walls, remnants of furniture, haphazard vegetation, cobwebs burdened with years of dust. The singing, interrupted by the approach of the camera, sounds like an evocation: “Carlo Gesualdo, Principe di Venosa...”. The camera then pursues a female figure, with a thick head of red hair, an ample cleavage and dressed in black. The pursuit down a staircase halts in front of a glass door, the edges of which are overrun with the dense branches of a climbing plant and swathes of cobwebs.

Maria D'Avalos reincarnated, played by Milva, preents herself to the camera in a backlight. A brief mention of the final days before she was murdered is then interrupted, while a recording of “Beltà, poi che t'assenti” rings out again from a portable stereo. Maria superimposes her own voice over the madrigal. Milva then sings fragments from Gesualdo, with her warm and powerful voice, thus adding to her work in the classical repertoire (most celebrated is her version of the aria “Ombra mai fu” from Handel's Xerxes, again from the Renaissance and Baroque period). She also adds this poetic and bewildered figure to her work as an actress, by interlinking Maria d'Avalos with the woman who is believed to be her ghost. Milva's stare, now ironic now crazed, her passionate momentum and seductive vocality contribute fully to turning Herzog's Gesualdo into a reflection on spectrality as a throwback to primal memories and obsessions. Maria/Milva takes her leave whilst remarking on her own ghostly nature. Her brief but dazzling appearance ends with Herzog requesting her address and telephone number for potential further acquaintance; the ghost retorts that she dwells in the sky, but that she can also be found, by taking the helicopter, in a box at La Scala in Milan; a reference to Gino Negri's *Diario dell'assassinata*, which is, in a sense, the spectre underlying this encounter in Herzog's

7. These are two exposed corpses, one male and one female, in which the arteriovenous system is surprisingly preserved and visible. In Herzog's film, it is assumed that the bodies belonged to Maria D'Avalos and her lover, Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria. Instead, as is well known, the two anatomical machines were created by Palermo physician Giuseppe Salerno.

documentary (which we shall be discussing later) and probably one of the possible reasons why the German director chose Milva. When in an interview Herzog defends the invention in his own film, linked, nevertheless, to a precise and documented biography of the artist, he quips in response to the question about Milva: “pure invention, of course” (Paganelli 2008: 155),⁸ which might refer to the fictitious character she embodies, and, therefore, invention as a means of transforming reality and arriving at deeper truths; it might also refer to the ability the singer possessed in reinventing and recreating the material she was to master.

In the apparition of Maria/Milva, the power of the camera is manifested in giving body to the ghost, and, in general, to the invisible, in rendering Gesualdo's music permanent beyond its own time. With her presence and her voice, the domain of filmic artifice (the ghostly apparition) allied to that of her expulsion (the musical performances of the madrigals), find its point of contact between contrasting tensions; the spirit of Maria, as Rogers suggests (2012: 197), resides in the limbo between documentary and fiction, in the dissonance between myth and reality. These two spaces converge in the moment in which Maria/Milva carves her ghostly presence into the recording of Gesualdo's poignant madrigal.

Herzog's film thus explores the deeper significance of Gesualdian music and myth by treading the line between musicology and spectrology. A synthesis of this encounter lies not only in the ghostly mask, but also in Milva's artistic identity, to which the following paragraphs are devoted.

3 The Multiple Lives of Milva

So let us now see how spectrality is also a key to understanding the multifaceted figure of Milva and her relationship with the character of Maria d'Avalos. In the beautiful iconographic supplement to Martina Corgnati's book (2023) *Milva l'ultima diva. Autobiografia di mia madre (Milva, the Last Diva. Autobiography of My Mother)*, there is a photo in which the singer's face (particularly the slant of her piercing eyes) is reflected, obliquely in the upper right-hand corner, in the piano: a double and phantasmatic image.

The strategies of doubling and spectralization are very prominent throughout the book; first of all because (as Giovanni Castaldi [2023: 277] remarks in the afterword) this is a psychodrama; just as in therapy or theatre, the author plays a role that is, in this case, terribly close to her actual self. Impersonating one's mother is never an easy task, especially when the figure is public, very famous and “cumbersome”.

By toying with it, Corgnati fully exploited the paratext, especially the title, subtitle and cover; according to a now canonical essay (Lejeune 1997), autobiography is based on an unshakable pact with the reader, who expects total congruence between author, narrator and character. It is these three instances that say “I”, and that should tell a true story, based directly on an experience deemed exemplary, or, at least, interesting and significant.

Autobiografia di mia madre is a deliberately paradoxical subtitle; it is the book Milva never had time to write, or perhaps never wanted to write (we will never know). It may recall in some ways Luca Ronconi's *Prove di autobiografia (Attempts at Autobiography)*, 2019), edited by Giovanni Agosti, or Pierre Pachet's *Autobiography of My Father* (2021), in which his son relates the exemplary story of an exiled Jewish father who lived through the entire 20th century.

The stark contrast between the title of Corgnati's book (which would be more typical of an essay or biography) and the subtitle, is also expressed graphically and chromatically on the front cover; the former is yellow on a black background, the latter is in much smaller print on plain white, whereas Milva's face stands out clearly, hinting at something off-screen, with the iconic red of her hair particularly highlighted. She is the floating spectre, a voice that is in some way speaking to us.

Roland Barthes (1966) argued that it is enough to transcribe a narrative text from third to first person to have proof that it is being narrated from a subjective point of view. Martina Corgnati's book would certainly pass this test, although not surprisingly the author preferred the objectivity of the third person. Moreover, if we turn to the criterion by which literary fiction is most often recognized (i.e. access to the inner lives of the

8. “pura invenzione, naturalmente”.

characters), we shall find this technique used almost exclusively with regard to Milva, occasionally for Martina, and rarely for the very many other figures involved in the story.

Doubling is not only about the structural relationship between the narrative voice of the daughter and the spectral voice of the mother. It is also a theme that appears on more than one occasion in works in which Milva has been the protagonist. Luciano Berio's *La Vera storia (The True Story)*, with a libretto by Italo Calvino, is divided into two parts: the first presents a story of elemental conflicts, while the second retells the same story in a disjointed and deconstructed form, leaving open any interpretation as to which version is the true one. In Brecht-Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins*, we have two female protagonists, both with the name Hanna, one a singer and the other a dancer, one narrating and explaining what the other one is evoking with the nonverbal language of dance; lastly, we might also recall the mirrored relationship between Vivaldi's Four Seasons and Astor Piazzolla's reworking.

In an excerpt from *Petrolino* (note 42), Pasolini (2022: 226) writes that the doubling is a way of expressing and rendering communicable the shattering of identities. So far we have talked about doubling, but actually when it comes to Milva's life and work the number two is not sufficient. Corgnati's book is divided, chronologically, into five lives, but at the end of the book one gets the impression that the number is even higher, and that, more importantly, the lives were lived largely simultaneously.

We feel a little envious here, since, as Freud (1905) argued, every person has a powerful desire for multiple lives, no matter how satisfied they are with their own. Milva was justifiably proud of this versatility when she officially bade farewell to her career as a live performer "after fifty-two years of uninterrupted activity, thousands of concerts and theatrical performances in almost half the planet, after a hundred albums recorded in at least seven different languages" (from the press release as reported by Corgnati 2023: 271).⁹ We know what the cost of all this was: drug addiction, depression (something we are not interested in here). Instead, we are interested in pointing out how this versatility also has a strong intermedial angle, ranging from music, theatre, cinema to literature; we might even add visual art if we take into account an important phenomenon such as collectionism (Milva collected paintings and art throughout her life; the Foundation directed by Corgnati will be tackling this in a forthcoming event).

In her press release, in order to illustrate her versatility, Milva mentions a few names, obviously among those most closely associated with her: Strehler, Battiato, Alda Merini. However, on reading Corgnati's book one encounters countless prominent, but less obvious figures (Gilberto Zorio, for example), or others who have been completely forgotten, but whose memory is worth preserving: Attilio Mangiulli known as Pan, with his struggles for the *Comédie italienne* in Paris (rescued thanks to the auctioning of a handkerchief that belonged to Marilyn Monroe), or Paulin (stage name of Paul Tretschel), an Italian-German supporter of the partisans, who unsuccessfully attempted a singing career in Piedmontese.

To summarize Milva's intermedial approach we might draw a comparison with another legendary figure of Italian song: Mina; a comparison that hinges on the opposition between two key concepts: focus/irradiation. Mina focused all her creative energy on song, on a prodigious voice, on performance, even after retiring early from live work (Muggeo, Rigola, Tomatis 2024); Milva, on the other hand, spread her talent across numerous arts and media, whilst running the risk of dissipating this talent, by indulging in the multi-facetedness of artistic languages. The difference between the two is also radical with regard to the ways in which they managed their careers: in Mina's case, early withdrawal from live performance and focusing only on the recorded voice; with Milva, a steady increase in live and stage commitments, leading up to a rather self-destructive level. As always, the dichotomy is not clear-cut: Mina's output has its own interesting poly-stylism, while Milva's shows an extraordinary focus on each genre tackled.

4 Transmedia Irradiations of Maria D'Avalos

Among the many figures who complemented Milva's boundless creativity, Gino Negri stands out: composer, actor and creator of a major television programme *Lo spazio musicale*. His output is extremely varied and

9. "Dopo cinquantadue anni di ininterrotta attività, migliaia di concerti e spettacoli teatrali in una buona metà del pianeta, dopo un centinaio di album incisi in almeno sette lingue diverse".

eclectic: in fact, he composed operas, ballets, songs, soundtracks, and stage music; his fame derives mainly from his association with Giorgio Strehler and Dario Fo, from the famous songs of the mob (*canzoni della mala*) written for Ornella Vanoni, and from the three albums he produced and arranged for Milva. Unfortunately, his operatic output, usually for small ensembles, which also includes a version of Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*), is today almost totally forgotten; little remains even in the "spectralized" streaming version, where one can generally find a great deal (but not all). We are particularly interested in *Diario dell'assassinata*, a work in one act and 12 tableaux, composed by Gino Negri in 1975, and staged in March 1978 at the Piccola Scala (a venue reserved for experimental works, now unfortunately no longer in operation). Never recorded and to this day totally untraceable, the work is extremely interesting and quite unclassifiable in its expressive peculiarities. Exploiting the connotations of the term "diary", which does not constitute a structured and organized autobiography, but a straightforward account of daily life, moment by moment, the work narrates all the stages in the story of Maria d'Avalos (as already mentioned) Gesualdo's wife, who was killed by him, along with her lover Filippo Carafa, when caught in the act of adultery in the palace of Piazza del Gesù in Naples.

A dark, Gothic legend has it that the two corpses were brutalized by a passing monk, while even more disturbing is the story that they are the two corpses with petrified circulatory systems that can be viewed in the Sansevero Chapel in Naples (the so-called and already mentioned anatomical machines actually commissioned in the 18th century by Prince de Sangro). Very Shakespearean (worthy of Macbeth) is the other myth in which Gesualdo cut down the entire forest surrounding the castle to express his despair in the aftermath of the murder.

Negri's opera thus has a single protagonist, who has to take on a substantial emotional and vocal *tour de force*. After the phase of falling in love, accomplished employing solutions that are by no means self-evident, the climax is, of course, the murder: Maria perceives that it is about to take place and expresses an almost romantic desire for death and oblivion, emphasized by harsh, almost dodecaphonic music: "Gesualdo, uccidimi, fa presto!...Lascia che lui viva...Gesualdo, uccidimi, affonda la tua spada nel mio cuore, io non sento più niente se non pietà per te (Gesualdo, kill me, hurry!...Let him live...Gesualdo, kill me, sink your sword into my heart, I feel nothing but pity for you)". Even more surprising and innovative is the ending, immediately after the murder: with its deliberately non-naturalistic solution, Negri envisions Maria d'Avalos remaining aware of events; in fact, she proclaims that she will only feel dead when their two bodies have been separated, with the music echoing "the gradual, whispered loss of the two lovers in the milky vagueness of the final void" (Corgnati 2023: 151).¹⁰

In this concluding part, we again find the stylistic device of doubling: "a polyphonic interweaving in dual voices, one recorded on a tape, based on a dialogue of thirds and fifths, in straight and contrary motion, full of dissonance and almost devoid of harmonic support" (Corgnati 2023: 150).¹¹ A tribute to Gesualdo da Venosa's experimentation, which was only fully understood and appreciated in the Romantic age, and subsequently in the twentieth century especially, starting with a homage by Stravinsky; it presented a challenge to Milva's voice, having to render the several melodic lines independently of each other, and the various effects of echoes and doublings.

Directed by Donato Renzetti, the work was given over to the direction of Filippo Crivelli, who embellished the music's irregular patterns with veils and vaguely phallic vertical shapes; on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Gesualdo's death, in 2014 it was revived for the first time at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, featuring Maria Pia De Vito, a voice hailing from jazz and strongly inclined towards Baroque vocal music, and with Stefania Rinaldi conducting. whereas at the first performance at the Piccola Scala it was coupled with a masterpiece of twelve-tone music, Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, in the Neapolitan revival it was followed by a recital of Renaissance music: a tangible sign of its two-sided nature.

As might be expected, the story of Maria d'Avalos could not fail to attract historians, artists, and scholars, quickly becoming embedded in the popular imagination. Coming from a very noble family, and first wed at the age of thirteen, Maria d'Avalos, in 1586, married for the third time, Prince Carlo Gesualdo of Venosa, who was her first cousin and four years younger than her. Chosen for her fecundity and not for her legendary

10. "La perdita progressiva, sussurrata, dei due amanti nella lattiginosa vaghezza del nulla definitivo".

11. "Un intreccio polifonico in doppia voce, una registrata su un nastro, basato su un dialogo di terze e di quinte, in moto retto e contrario, pieno di dissonanze e quasi privo di appoggio armonico".

beauty, which was also glorified by Torquato Tasso, it seems that Maria had to endure repeated mistreatment by a cold and jealous husband before falling victim to the crime of honour. Among the many books and various works devoted to Maria d'Avalos, we close by choosing a further two examples of completely contrasting character, but both strongly “spectralized”: sumptuous and Baroque the first, subtle and dreamlike the second. A scholar of Neapolitan folk traditions, the recently deceased music composer, Roberto De Simone (2013) could not fail to encounter the figure of the famous madrigalist, to whom he dedicated *Cinque voci per Gesualdo. Travestimento in musica e teatro di un mito d'amore, morte e magia* (*Five Voices for Gesualdo. A Masquerade in Music and Theatre of a Myth of Love, Death, and Magic*). In a Baroque and highly mescidated language, alternating Neapolitan and ecclesiastical Latin, highbrow and grotesque registers, the text implies that the crime was only envisioned by the composer, and carried out instead by the powerful Jesuits; here Gesualdo appears as openly bisexual, proud of his crime as a work of art, which is not to be minimized as mere jealousy; at the end of the text (and in the accompanying story by Mario Bauduin) comparisons emerge with Shakespeare, Giordano Bruno, Jack the Ripper and with Pasolini's death, absurdly presented as a suicide, thus following Zigaina's infamous thesis (1995). De Simone also composed a *Requiem for Pasolini* (1986) performed at the Teatro San Carlo, of which he was superintendent. In short, for De Simone, Gesualdo is one of the many atavistic and symbolic spectres that his theatre aims to re-evoke.

Composed in 1992 and staged at the prestigious Festival della Valle d'Itria in Martina Franca, in 2013, *Maria di Venosa* by Francesco d'Avalos (a composer and conductor who is a direct descendant of Gesualdo's wife) is an experimental work in which the action is only hinted at, in ghostly form, by three dancers; the story is narrated by the Choruses, as if it were being re-experienced by an elderly Gesualdo, while the music alternates between passages commanded by a full, Wagnerian orchestra and parts that cite and reprise 16th-century madrigals.

Even in their radical differences, the two works show how well-suited the story of Gesualdo da Venosa and Maria d'Avalos is, as regards the various forms of spectralization: as a haunting memory of a distant past, a traumatic event embedded in mythology or a place where images, sounds, and visions are made real.

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