Music and Language? Deleuze, Guattari and Berio on Visage

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Abstract

In the plateau *November 20, 1923: Postulates of linguistics*, Deleuze and Guattari subvert the traditional confrontation between language and music, refusing to look at the latter for the constants that are usually thought to define the first and recognizing in both systems a regime of continuous variation. An example of this regime is Luciano Berio's *Visage*, in which «despite what Berio himself says, it is less a matter of using pseudo constants to produce a simulacrum of language or a metaphor for the voice than of attaining that secret neuter language without constants […].» (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 96) This use of Berio against Berio himself is probably due to the declaration contained in *Visage (author's note)*: «When I was composing *Visage* what attracted me […] was research intended as a way to expand the chances of bringing nearer musical and acoustic processes, and as a means to find musical equivalents of linguistic articulations.» Despite the apparent contradiction, D&G and Berio agree that music is not a form of sui generis language, nor, on the contrary, an expressive form without any relation to language, but rather a deterritorialization of the voice that produces a form of varied repetition of language, now devoid of meaning.

1. Music and language

The relationship of esteem between Gilles Deleuze and Luciano Berio is attested by two undated letters, presumably from the seventies, in which the philosopher expresses his admiration for the work of the composer, recognizing him as one of the few musicians who has been able to «maintain joy» (cited in Quaglia 2010: 228). In the first letter Deleuze requests a recording of *Visage* (1961) for electronic sounds on magnetic tape and the voice of Cathy Berberian[1].

It should be noted that Deleuze's interest in the «uncanny point of indiscernibility between human voice and inhuman sound» (Murphy 2004: 167) presented in *Visage* cannot

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[1] Both the letters are preserved in Basel, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Sammlung Luciano Berio, «Korrespondenz». For these documents, that I was able to see as a visiting scholar at the Foundation in August 2019, I thank the director of the Sammlung Berio and scientific director of the Centro Studi Luciano Berio, Prof. Angela Ida De Benedictis, and the founder and honorary president, Prof. Talia Pecker Berio.

be reduced to a biographical circumstance but finds a precise correspondence on a theoretical level. One of the two most important places in *Mille Plateaux*[2] where Berio is mentioned, are in fact linked to an exemplary experiment in electronic music, which follows a few years later *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* (1958), the first work of synthesis between voice and magnetic tape born from the collaboration between Berio and Umberto Eco.

In that case the operation explicitly aimed at an elaboration of the problem represented by the relationship between text and music, between sense and sound: the work originated from a radio documentary on onomatopoeia in poetry and in particular in the eleventh chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Berio's solution, according to the reading of Claude Rosset, consisted in a form of regression in which there was a coincidence between language and music «at a level prior to that of the constitution of organized language»[3].

Visage, the following realization for voice and magnetic tape, further explicates the investigation of the relationship between music and language going in the direction of an equalization, this time under the sign of language. In the note that accompanies the work, Berio writes: «When I composed *Visage* I was attracted, as always, by a research that allowed me to broaden the possibilities of convergence between musical processes and acoustic processes, and to find musical equivalents of the linguistic articulations»[4].

A circumstance that seems remarkable to me in Deleuze and Guattari's use of Berio's work is precisely the theoretical adoption in the opposite direction to the composer's intentions:

> And despite what Berio himself says, [in *Visage*] it is less a matter of using pseudo constants to produce a simulacrum of language or a metaphor for the voice than of attaining that secret neuter language without constants and entirely in indirect discourse where the synthesizer and the instrument speak no less than the voice, and the voice plays no less than the instrument. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 96)

But let us briefly explain what Deleuze and Guattari mean by language, at least in the context of the plateau *November 20, 1923. Postulates of linguistics* in which there is a close and in-depth confrontation with the structuralist and post-structuralist tradition (Benveniste) as well as with the philosophy of ordinary language (Austin) and generative grammar (Chomsky).

The primary function of language is not informative or communicative, but resides in its being a watchword, that is, in what Austin (1962) calls the illocutive dimension: in language something is done, the bodies undergo incorporeal transformations, even though

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[2]   The other main reference to Berio in *Mille Plateaux* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 342) is connected to the question of the 'people-to-come'. For Bogue (2013: 50-52), Berio's treatment of this topic is well represented by *Coro* (1974-76) for 40 voices and instruments.

[3]   Cited in Restagno (1995: 19).

[4]   The *Author's Note* of *Visage*, without a date indication, is published on the site of Centro Studi Luciano Berio, http://www.lucianoberio.org/node/1504?1391573112=1 .

they do not physically change, and are subject to a change comparable to «a leap in place» (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 81). Although everything looks the same, in reality there is nothing that has not changed: the examples proposed range from the pronouncement of the words "I love you" to the Eucharistic transubstantiation, from the proclamation of the general mobilization to the sudden (and not empirically observable) transformation of passengers of an airplane into hostages when the hijacker draws the gun and announces the terroristic action.

With respect to the Chomskyan project of linguistics, aimed at finding structural constants or invariants in the language system, Deleuze and Guattari affirm the primacy of continuous variation, that is, of a variation which does not imply an identity with respect to which it presents itself as different, but which animates the life of language itself: assuming a musical example, the authors write, «the theme is variation» (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 93). To explain the «continuous variation at work within a language» Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 94) refer to the progressive abandonment of the tonal system occurred in the development of Western musical practice: lacking the center of gravity constituted by the tonic, as well as the moment of suspension represented by the dominant, we see a progressive replacement of closed and centered forms with open and continuous processes. As the authors say: «The couple matter-form is replaced by the coupling material-forces. The synthesizer has taken the place of the old 'a priori synthetic judgment,' and all functions change accordingly» (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 95).

It is in this context that the reference to Berio's work finds space. A reference that, as we have anticipated, is turned against the intentions of the composer himself. Coming back to the musical example of tonal and post-tonal systems, Deleuze and Guattari imagine the objection that music and language are not superimposable phenomena since there cannot be an exact correspondence between them. But it is not such a correspondence – traditionally interpreted as the subordination of music to language, or as the raising of music to a *sui generis* language – that justifies the comparison between music and language, rather the common staging of a continuous variation. Such a variation finds in the voice its own field of application:

> The voice in music has always been a privileged axis of experimentation, playing simultaneously on language and sound. Music has linked the voice to instruments in various ways; but as long as the voice is song, its main role is to "hold" sound, it functions as a constant circumscribed on a note and *accompanied* by the instrument. Only when the voice is tied to timbre does it reveal a tessitura that renders it heterogeneous to itself and gives it a power of continuous variation: it is then no longer accompanied, but truly "machined", it belongs to a musical machine that prolongs or superposes on a single plane parts that are spoken, sung, achieved by special effects, instrumental, or perhaps electronically generated. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 96)

2. The paradox of *Visage*

But what happens in Berio's *Visage*, and why would this work best exemplify the achievement of a «secret neuter language» made of pure variations? Going back to the *Author Note*, let's read:

> *Visage* is essentially a radio program: almost a soundtrack for a drama never written before. Its destination, therefore, is not only the concert hall but any place or medium that allows the reproduction of recorded sounds. Founded on the symbolic and representative charge of gestures and vocal inflections, with the «shadows of meaning» and the mental associations that accompany them, *Visage* can be understood as a transformation of real and concrete vocal behaviors, ranging from inarticulated sound to syllable, from laughter to weeping and singing, from aphasia to models of inflection derived from specific languages: English and Italian radio, Hebrew, Neapolitan dialect, etc.. *Visage* does not therefore propose a significant text and language as such, but develops its features.

Leaving Berio's adherence to the structuralist and semiotic lexicon aside, let's pay attention to the process of «transformation of vocal behavior»: Berio's idea is to assume linguistic and non-linguistic expressions to stage a sound mutation with a linguistic appearance and this appearance must be sought, in accordance with what Deleuze and Guattari said, precisely in the regime of variation. Another way of understanding Berio's work is to assume various expressions, including some deriving from sedimented and recognizable «specific languages», to produce something that goes beyond the dimension of «text and language as such». Therefore, to take charge of the voice, in the multiplicity of its possible uses, in order to free a power that is no longer significant but imaginative.

This programme, which Berio will continue with *Sequenza III* (1965) and *Coro* (1974-76), precisely responds to the definition that Deleuze and Guattari give of music: «Music is a deterritorialization of the voice, which becomes less and less tied to language, just as painting is a deterritorialization of the face» (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 302). The authors do not fail to underline the paradox for which Berio entitled *Visage*, which rather presents itself as a deterritorialization of the face by the voice[5]. It is no doubt that Berio's work on the voice tends progressively to be constituted as an extensification of language, a liberation of sound from meaning; but which could be the link between language and *visage* in Berio's perspective?

In his lectures at Harvard University in the academic year 1993-94, Berio tells of his first meeting with the linguist Roman Jakobson in Cambridge in 1965[6]. When suddenly asked about the meaning of music, Berio answers that music is all that we listen to with

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[5] «The voice is far ahead of the face, very far ahead. Entitling a musical work *Visage* (Face) thus seems to be the greatest of sound paradoxes» (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 302).

[6] On the relationship between Berio's musical work and Jakobson's phonology, see Menezes (1993).

the intention of listening to music, and that therefore everything can become music. Going deeper into his answer some years later, the composer reflects on an anecdote told by Jakobson himself in the essay *Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics* (1960, the year before Berio's *Visage*):

> He gave the well-known example of a missionary in Africa trying to convince members of a local community not to go around naked. "But you're naked, too", replied a tribesman, pointing at the missionary's face. "But only my face is naked", said the missionary, to which the candid reply was: "Well, for us the face is all over!". (Berio 2006: 49)

Jakobson's point was that the poetic process is not something separated from ordinary language, intended as a complex and multidimensional apparatus; following Jakobson, Berio states that music is not a form of art confined in a determinate field but involves a kind of extended expressivity, borrowing its elements from the totality of codes it get in touch with[7]. «The most significant vocal music of the last few decades – Berio continues – has been investigating exactly that: the possibility of exploring and absorbing musically the full face of language» (Berio 2006: 50), that is to say that also in music the 'face' is all over[8], the expressivity is not due to an auto-limitation of means but, quite on the contrary, it implies a large intake and a consequent deterritorialization – here the term used by Deleuze and Guattari is proper – of other codes, as for example the numerous historical-natural languages in *Visage*. Berio's idea of music as *visage* is in this sense on the side of a deterritorialization of the linguistic elements through the expressive power of the voice.

In this sense, Berio's conception of *visage* is similar to the one that Deleuze will present some years later in *Cinema 1*:

> The face is this organ-carrying plate of nerves which has sacrificed most of its global mobility and which gathers or expresses in a free way all kinds of tiny local movements which the rest of the body usually keeps hidden. Each time we discover these two poles in something – reflecting surface and intensive micro-movements – we can say that this thing has been treated as a face [*visage*]*:* it has been 'envisaged' or rather 'faceified' [*visagéifiée*], and in turn it stares at us [*dévisage*]*,* it looks at us… even if it does not resemble a face. (Deleuze 1986: 88)[9]

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7   In another Berio's essay on his own composition *A-Ronne*: «[…] Jakobson concludes: the face of poetry
     is everywhere, every linguistic element can be converted in poetic figure» (Berio 1991: 287).
8   See also Berio (1967: 60).
9   Thanks to Daniela Angelucci for the suggestion.

Anything can therefore be seen as a face: Berio's *Visage* does not (materially) resemble a face but, since the reflecting surface of the electronic sounds sustain the micro-movements of the vocal gestures, it turns to us with its extensive and inclusive facial expressiveness, not imitating language but creating an artistic *simulacrum* of it.

3. Face and deterritorialization

Let us now turn back to *Mille Plateaux*. The paradox identified by Deleuze and Guattari concerns the apparent contradiction between a mobile and iridescent, molecular music, like that of Berio, and the interpretation given by the composer himself, through the title *Visage*. Let us remember that, talking about the infinite reference of the sign, Deleuze and Guattari had defined the term of *faciality*:

> At any rate, this pure formal redundancy of the signifier could not even be conceptualized if it did not have its own substance of expression, for which we must find a name: *faciality.* Not only is language always accompanied by faciality traits, but the face crystallizes all redundancies, it emits and receives, releases and recaptures signifying signs. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 115).

In this perspective the face is deeply involved in a process of reterritorialization of language and counts as «Icon proper to the signifying regime» (*ibid.*). The authors' astonishment with respect to the title chosen by Berio derives therefore from the discordance between the riterritorialization operating in the face and the deterritorialization of the music itself: «This is a molecular face, produced by electronic music. The voice precedes the face, itself forms the face for an instant, and outlives it, increasing in speed—on the condition that it is unarticulated, asignifying, asubjective» (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 546, n. 91).

In a very different way – concerning just the starting point, but not the final goal –, Berio's idea of *visage* implies a face already deterritorialized, dislocated over the whole body. In the same way, the connection between face and language is the opposite of the one assumed by Deleuze and Guattari: far from being the «Icon proper to the signifying regime», according to Berio the face is the fluid and effusive stage of language, seen in its widest interweaving with body and life. Despite the apparent contradiction, Deleuze and Guattari, and Berio agree that music is not a form of sui generis language, nor, on the contrary, an expressive form without any relation to language, but rather a deterritorialization of the voice that produces a form of varied repetition of language, now devoid of meaning.

We can now ask ourselves: what is the device that allows a deterritorialization of the voice, like *Visage*'s? The answer – we anticipate it immediately – is: a certain use of repetition[10]. In the *Author's Note* Berio writes: «*Visage* does not therefore propose a significant text and language as such, but develops its features. A single word is pronounced twice: '*parole*'»[11]. In a 1993 interview with the Brazilian composer Flo Menezes, Berio explains that in *Visage* «the voice never says things, but is rather limited to gestures, vocal gestures» (Berio 1993: 281) and, ironically, the word *parole* (in the two possible readings, plural of *parola*, 'word' in Italian, and singular, in the Saussurean opposition to *langue*, in French) is taken as a signal. What is repeated twice is therefore an emptied word, which no longer says anything and even shows its loss of effectiveness: the work, as we know, was intended for the radio and Berio had conceived it as the final act of abandonment of a medium defined as «the instrument most used for the dissemination of useless words» (Berio 1993: 286).

In musical deterritorialization, the voice becomes less and less language and rises to the status of gesture. On this point Berio has come back several times, both on the compositional and on the theoretical level. Take *A-Ronne* (1975) for eight singers on a text by Edoardo Sanguineti: here the work on the text, dismembered and repeated, with countless variations, marks a departure from the language and its referential functions that allows access to a properly musical level. Or, even before, think of *Sequenza III* (1965) for female voice: 44 different expressive indications regulate a succession of vocal gestures, from cough to laughter, from groans to scream, while the listener recognizes some English phonemes: «Give me a few words to sing»[12].

In fact, and we move to the theoretical level, the musical gesture that is the result of the process of deterritorialization of the voice, less and less linguistic, is precisely an act of taking charge of the language and a deactivation of its power to refer to other: in order to sing, words are borrowed and the sound is distilled by sieving the sense through a process of variation. In this way it is staged a gesture that presupposes a history and at the same time establishes a dialectical relationship with it. Thus understood, the musical gesture does not identify a presumed original and immediately communicative dimension of sound but, on the contrary, the trace of processes and symbolic exchanges that have already taken place. With an expression by Roland Barthes (1982), the gesture is the «supplement of an act» (also an act of signification), therefore the exposition of an expressiveness that exceeds the language and that constitutes its deterritorialization[13].

As a gesture, music can be considered as a varied repetition of language, of which it takes on certain traits (for example, articulation or syntactic order) to project them into a

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[10]   I decided here to develop the theme of the use of repetition starting from Berio but, obviously, the question is deeply linked to the elaboration of Deleuze in *Difference and repetition* (1994), which is not possible to deal with here given the limits of my subject.

[11]   For a musical and structural analysis of *Visage*, see Menezes (1990).

[12]   On the relationship between music and language in *Sequenza III*, see Lyotard & Avron (1971).

[13]   For an account of gesture as supplement of an act and «posterity of language», see Oliva (2018).

different and autonomous dimension. Berio's specific work on the voice confirms the significance of the definition of music given by Deleuze and Guattari and offers the opportunity to think about the connection between gesture and refrain under the species of varied repetition. The musical gesture, when it does not repeat single words (as it happens with the term *parole* in *Visage*), takes charge of the human capacity to make symbolic exchanges and, starting from this, exposes a rest, a gap, which extends beyond the edge of the exchanges made, of the messages exchanged, of the things sustained – of the *res gestae*.[14]

The apparent privilege granted to the voice remains unquestioned: as Deleuze and Guattari already wondered about the sound primacy of the refrain, we can ask ourselves why, among all the musical expressions, the voice has the role of deterritorialized effect of language, when instead – at least for common sense – the voice represents a sort of state of nature of the pre-linguistic expression. But on this particular point – the impossibility of a pre-linguistic state of nature and the regressive nature of any attempt to keep in touch with it – Berio and Deleuze agree. As Claire Parnet observes in a *Dialogue* with Deleuze:

> Language is first, it has invented the dualism. […] We must pass through [*passer par*] dualisms because they are in language, it is not a question of getting rid of them, but we must fight against language, invent stammering not in order to go back to a pre-linguistic pseudo-reality, but to trace a vocal or written line which will make language flow between these dualism, and which will define a minority usage of language, an inherent variation as Labov say. (Deleuze & Parnet 1987: 34)

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14   On gesture as a third kind of human activity, alongside *poiesis* and *praxis*, see Agamben (2018).

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