

An Index of Metals by Romitelli/Pachini: An abstract-concrete multimedia essay on corruption

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We can begin by making two specifications in terms of terminology:

- various genres can be included in the transverse category of 'abstract video': 'abstract cinema' and 'visual music', abstract videoart, abstract cartoon cinema, abstract computer graphics, etc. Although they are quite distinct in both historical and technical terms, they all nonetheless share the essential quality of abstraction, as the term is normally used for the early 20th century abstract movements in painting and applied here to the moving image;
- 2. just as Nicholas Cook speaks of 'musical multimedia' for multimedia "in which music plays a constitutive role" (Cook 1998, p. VI), so one can define 'musical videoart' a type of videoart "in which the music plays a primary role and takes on a crucial importance. Most videoart has music, but can still not properly be called musical videoart (although the boundary between the two types is by no means clearly marked)" (Lombardi Vallauri 2009, p. 144).

In the intersection of the two categories of abstract video and musical videoart we find a work like *An Index of Metals* in which the music ranks at least equal with the video component, and narration and (more radically) representation, two typical and necessary features in traditional cinema, are almost completely absent. In fact the formal aspect of the video component of *An Index of Metals*, although stemming from concrete original shots (of a series of metallic states and conformations), is abstract in outcome: so essentially material-based, and subject to such a range of computer elaborations (exactly like an acoustic sound treated electronically), that it proves to be practically indecipherable in figurative terms.

Over the last few years there has been a strong trend in the contemporary arts (making this a singular case in the extensive field of multimedia production) towards combining music and abstract video. This is a transversal trend concerning both the milieu of academic production, showcased in festivals that count on institutional backing, and that of popular genres, whose practices, whether free or commercial, are more pervasive in society. Right from the outset, in all the most important projects combining music and video the latter component consciously emulated the peculiar abstract nature of music. Just as Kandinsky based his new conception of painting on music's natural status (Kandinsky 1979, pp. 21-23), so all the early and most important essays in abstract cinema took music as their paradigm (Provenzano 1992). 1 However, developments in recent years testify to some different motivations and practices. More than in the past, nowadays the appropriation of a 'second' medium, distinct from the artist's technical specialization, can also start from the music: increasingly it is composers, who may be expert and indeed professionals in sound organization, who decide also to exploit video, having recourse to expert help but also as authors in their own right.

An osmosis between the crafts of the composer and the video-maker was already made feasible by the equipment that characterised the predigital electronic era. In the sphere of music this underwent a particularly intense development from the 1940s onwards.

Thus the boundary delimiting electroacoustic music is not clearcut. While not actually coinciding with analogous practices – popular music, radio, recordings – it has the same technical equipment and procedures, and hence also vocabulary. The genres are juxtaposed, and so too are the protagonists; the competences that the electronic composer can call on mean that he often has more in common with radio or

¹ While in view of its status as a social practice, non-abstract videoart, although often intrinsically bound up with music (Gennaro – Borio 2007, pp. 349-350), occupies predominantly the field of the visual arts.



image technicians than with composers for orchestra (Delalande 2001, p. 395, my italics).

The experiments with sound which Pierre Schaeffer carried out as part of his work for radio were explicitly based on the technical and aesthetic paradigm of the cinema (Schaeffer 1941-1942). One only has to think, for example, of the composition of the formal dimension of duration, which in both spheres was effected by means of the material editing of tape fragments rather than using symbols, signs in an allographic regime, as in traditional notated music (Goodman [1968] 1976, pp. 99-107). Nonetheless the subsequent dissemination of computer technology gave a further fundamental impulse to this reciprocal assimilation of techniques. The new possibility of numeric 'transcoding' (Manovich [2001] 2002, pp. 67-71) played a decisive role because any type of material data (audio, video or whatever) can be reduced to a single type of symbolic data (the binary code): "the media differ at the 'cultural level', while they converge at the 'IT level', where they are all represented equally and managed as numeric forms" (Lombardi Vallauri 2009, p. 154n). Above all, for the first time in history, a common codification enables the 'direct' transposition of one type of material data into another, together with all the conceivable reciprocal elaborations. Just as a composer can use an image as his construction material, so the video-maker can use a sound; similarly, the algorithms used in the softwares for the elaboration of the audio or video signal are analogous, for example when morphing between two timbres or two human faces (this is not to deny or diminish the essential importance of the various constraints imposed on the media and artistic genres by their specific psycho-perceptive bias, with its biological basis and historical and cultural conditioning). The process of the 'fraying' (Verfransung) of the boundaries between the arts identified by Adorno has undergone a dramatic acceleration (Gennaro - Borio 2007, pp. 335-337), fostered by technological progress and by its socioeconomic effects (on account of the ever greater accessibility of the means of production).

An Index of Metals participates quite consciously in the historical and aesthetic scenario we have described, as its author makes clear: "C'est le projet tout à fait original de penser conjointement le son et la lumière, la musique et la vidéo, d'utiliser timbres et images comme éléments d'un même continuum soumis aux mêmes transformations informatiques" (Romitelli 2003). In my analysis I shall show how this important work of Italian musical videoart (that has already received at least fifty performances in international venues) achieves that particular type of audiovisual integration which arises out of the encounter between music and abstract digital video (whereas it lies outside the scope of this article to investigate other, nonetheless significant, aspects, such as the separate

autonomous components, both video and musical, or their relationship with the verbal text).

An Index of Metals was commissioned by the Fondation Royaumont and received its first performance on 3 October 2003 in the Festival Voix Nouvelles in Cercy-Pontoise (France). Both the full score (Ricordi, Milano 2003) and an audio/video recording (Cypres, 2005, CYP5622) have been published. The work is written for a soprano soloist, an instrumental ensemble – with electric guitar, bass guitar and keyboard, but also the voice and acoustic instruments are all amplified – and electronic devices. The video component involves the projection of images on three separate screens (measuring 3 x 4 metres) placed alongside one another. Fausto Romitelli (Gorizia, 1963 – Milano, 2004) was responsible for the music and the overall conception, Paolo Pachini (Roma, 1964) made the video (in collaboration with Leonardo Romoli – Firenze, 1972), and Kenka Lèkovich (Fiume, 1962) wrote the text.

The composer and the two video makers were interdependent in the work's composition but they nonetheless maintained a degree of autonomy. Following the initial joint planning, in which the poetic motivations and main technical orientations were established. Pachini – who maintained daily telephone contact with Romitelli - made most of the video. Thus the composer already had this to refer to when he came to write the music, while the video itself was subsequently modified to conform to the music (Pachini 2011). For example, one fundamental datum was the duration of the musical macrosections, which imposed major cuts on the video. However, aside from the restrictions of this macro-level, the creation and elaboration of the images and the rhythm adopted in the editing were entirely decided by Pachini (and this did in fact involve some slight décalages with respect to the macrosections). Nonetheless, across the various planes of communication the work undoubtedly presents a single and coherent overall intent, and this is borne out by several features. In the first place the authors deliberately avoided any pedantic inter-media correspondence.² The overall coherence perceptible to the spectator has to be identified at the deep level – thus tending to elude analysis and require the exercise of interpretation – where the structure takes on sense, and the formal data are connotated by extra-formal meanings.³ In the second place it should be borne in mind that, of all the video types, abstract video is aesthetically closest to music, while the radically distinct nature of the individual media proves all the more critical, not to say blatant, whenever the tendency is toward assimilation.

² What Cook calls 'conformance' (Cook 1998, pp. 98-102).

³ What Adorno called the 'spiritual content' of art, differing both from its explicit content and from its sensible aspect (Adorno [1970] 1975, pp. 147-150, 218-219).



The sections that constitute *An Index of Metals* – which in the recording (Romitelli – Pachini 2005) have an overall duration of about 50 minutes – are clearly separated, even though they follow on one from one another without a break. The succession is as follows (reading from left to right: track number on the DVD; title in the dvd; title in the score; duration on the CD – practically equivalent to the DVD; whether or not the voice features; bars in the score):

1	Introduzione	Introduzione	3' 20"		1-49
2	Primo Intermezzo	Primo Intermezzo	1' 39"		50
3	Hellucination 1:	1	7' 48"	voice	51-279
	Drowningirl				
4	Secondo Intermezzo	Secondo Intermezzo	2'03"		280
5	Drowningirl II	2	9' 48"	voice	281-509
6	Terzo intermezzo	Terzo Intermezzo	1' 21"		510
7	Drowningirl III	3	6' 26"	voice	511-640
8	Adagio	4	3'42"		641-681
9	Quarto Intermezzo	Quarto Intermezzo	0'50"		682-687
10	Hellucination 2/3:	5	7'00"	voice	688-797
	Risingirl/Earpiercingbells				
11	Finale	(untitled)	2'23"		798-920
12	Cadenza	Cadenza	2'58"		921

The macroform of *An Index of Metals* is clearly apparent both to the eye and to the ear. It involves an initial and a concluding part, *Introduzione* and *Finale* with *Cadenza*, which frame the work in a very traditional manner. Within this frame the sections that make up the body of the work alternate strictly between pieces on a significant scale (in terms of duration, structural density, use of the solo voice), involving not surprisingly the enunciation of the poetic text, and less substantial pieces (exclusively instrumental, simpler and briefer) providing a respite between the phases of greater intensity (we shall deal below with the only exception to this strict alternation, the *Adagio*).

At this level of macrosections there is a clear inter-media correspondence, with each new musical piece being associated with video parts that are also recognisable and practically self-contained. However, at the intermediate and lower levels of formal duration the audiovisual synchronizations constitute an exception with respect to the prevalent asynchrony (nonetheless synchronizations occur, for example, in the following cases: numerous and regular in *Introduzione*; barely perceptibly in the final part of *Drowningirl II*, from about 7' 30", where the reiterated convergence of the instrumental polyphony on the unison corresponds with a minimum of *décalage* to the brief freeze of the image on the three screens; and in *Hellucination 2/3*, although here the perception of any regularity is even more distorted).

In fact a concordance between music and video emerges not so much in the parameters of vertical temporality as in the construction of horizontal temporality, and this aspect is so pervasive as to constitute the hallmark of the work's inter-media constitution. In both media we find a prevalently *processual* organization of form, i.e. one that:

- o. contemplates some sort of morphological mutation over time (this might seem obvious, but it cannot be taken for granted either in music or in contemporary videoart);
- ensures that such a mutation comes about in a linear, gradual and substantially *continuous* fashion;
- 2. often *exhibits* such a mutation, making it the formal focus of interest;
- often matches the perceptible process to an underlying constructive principle which will also be processual, so that it is actually the latter that is exhibited;
- 4. often gives the process an automatic, mechanical character, meaning that its execution is apparently not guided by a compositional will extraneous to the generative rule.

In the field of music this organization, which can be called 'writing by processes', is a technical and stylistic approach which in recent decades has been adopted across a whole range of quite disparate movements such as minimalism (Reich 1968), spectralism (Baillet 2001) and the post-serial Italian school, notably among the successors of Donatoni and Berio (Lombardi Vallauri 2007, pp. 148-150). The derivation of its underlying principle, which consists in basing the generation and development of material on automatic combinatory devices, can probably be traced back to serialism (in the broad sense of the term), and also to the operative paradigm of electronic music and in general to the propensity of contemporary composition to adopt a scientific and technological approach, meaning that the artist feels comfortable using categories such as automatism, permutation, continuum, entropy, and so on. Romitelli in particular made an explicit acknowledgment of his critical adhesion to the technological vocation of his times (Romitelli 2001).

In the video component of *An Index of Metals* the adoption of the processual form is expressly derived from music: in fact, as we have seen, this was Romitelli's technical and poetic intention. With *Index* he aimed on one hand, for the first time in his career, to expand his poetic of 'violence' to a global dimension, composing a 'mass of the senses', a multisensorial immersion (also by means of such technical devices as surround sound and video projection on multiple screens) analogous to the 'light shows' in vogue in the 1960s and 70s (Romitelli 2003). On the other hand he was also interested in producing a work featuring all the attributes of complexity and structural coherence typical of the academic tradition: featuring, in



this case, not only intra- but also inter-media coherence. One expedient which contributed to this goal was the digital codification of both sound and image, since, thanks to their computing power, electronic devices are uniquely efficient in generating processual perceptive objects (which the human author is able to control and manage). It was also undoubtedly a help that, prior to branching out as video-maker, Pachini was himself a composer, proficient in the latest musical techniques, enabling him to honour Romitelli's aspirations to the full.

Thus in several sections of *An Index of Metals* we find processes which are gradual (1), formal (2), generative (3) and in differing degrees automatic (4) in both the musical and the video strands. Their presence takes on different significances in the categorically distinct planes of the audiovisual experience across the whole spectrum ranging from the objective datum to the spiritual content. In structural terms the first type of process to emerge concerns the quantity and complexity of the material used within the temporal unit, and thus which takes the form - whether increasing or decreasing – of densification or, less often, of rarefaction. On the semiotically intermediate plane, if the structural forms of the music and the video become associated with other structural forms such as those of the physical reality, the same process can be interpreted as the tendency to order/entropy, ascent/fall, aggregation/disgregation. But lastly, on the plane of freer connotations (and giving recognition to the importance of the verbal text in the inter-media sum of the parts) what comes ideally to predominate in the work is the process of corruption, in the broadest sense, which includes chemical and organic alteration and degeneration, contamination, both physical and mental illness, death and decomposition.

In order to illustrate this predominant structural/spiritual character of the audiovisual constitution of *An Index of Metals*, I shall look at some sections which fulfill different typical formal functions in the work:

- Introduzione;
- *Hellucination 1: Drowningirl*, representing the most substantial sections;
- Secondo Intermezzo, and Adagio with Quarto Intermezzo, as examples of the minor intervening sections;
- Finale with Cadenza.

In view of its brevity and relative simplicity, but also because – coming at the beginning of the work – it stands as an immediate declaration of intent, the *Introduzione* provides an excellent exemplification of the extent to which *An Index of Metals* favours processes of densification (corroborated in this case, as we have seen, by inter-media synchronization). The musical form of this piece consists entirely in the progressively varied repetition of

a single element (a famous *objet trouvé* of contemporary pop culture): the beginning of Shine on You Crazy Diamond sampled from the Pink Floyd vinyl LP. Each time this element is repeated, interspersed with long pauses, it is overlaid with an orchestral figure which at first conforms perfectly and then becomes increasingly distorted and invasive: the figure begins as a straightforward G minor chord, to which quartertone and semitone distortions are gradually added, getting further and further from the model (realising what Gérard Grisey, speaking of Romitelli, referred to as "spectralisme barbare"). The durations also undergo a gradual process in the form of a parabola: for a lengthy interval the sample is extended while the pauses get shorter; then finally – with a striking effect of figural thickening and concitato – the pauses get shorter and shorter until they are eliminated, while the expositions of the sample also get shorter (according to the following scheme of durations, expressed to the nearest second; sample: 4", 5", 8", 9", 10", 10", 11", 12", 12", 11", 10", 9", 6", 7"; intervening pauses: 16", 14", 8", 7", 7", 6", 5", 2", 3", 0", 1", 0", 0"). In the video a similar process occurs involving a simple quantitative temporal increase in the appearances of the reference image: a grey circle appearing on a dark screen in which faint whitish traces begin to rotate slowly (a form suited to an introduction since it is still barely articulated). This densification is achieved by the acceleration of the editing, roughly corresponding to the scheme of the musical durations, and also by the progressive imposition and multiplication of the image on the three screens. Thus we see that the combination of cyclic structure and distortion, which is characteristic of all Romitelli's mature production (Arbo 2005b), is present in An Index of Metals not only on the musical plane.

In Hellucination 1: Drowningirl all the media contribute to the representation of a slow, gradual and inexorable fall: the verbal text by means of conventional explicit signification; the video by means of almost abstract images, which however were duly elaborated (as 'snapshots') and edited (in the sequence chosen), to allude to a reality; and the music by analogy or structural isomorphism with the chosen element of reality. How does this multimedia 'drowning' come about? The key is provided by the perfectly transparent poetic text, which in turn is a comment on Roy Lichtenstein's picture Drowning Girl (1963 – Museum of Modern Art, New York). In the video, the images pass from an initial condition in which the metal is barely present as mere appearance, a steely gleam in the celestial vast, to subsequent stages in which it gradually takes on colour, heat (o' 54") and mass (2' 16"), until it becomes earthy (4' 50"), almost organic even (6' 22"), and visceral (6' 45"), tracing the whole symbolic arc from the sublime to the basest. In the music the melody in the voice lingers with a predominantly stepwise movement on the same pitch set (none other than a D minor scale) and on descending chromaticisms, while the ensemble pursues a cyclical spiralling movement (over a bass in an almost diatonic D minor



mode) which in appearance – literally impossible, but conjured up by the part writing and underscored by the prevailing glissando figure – is always descending (in *Drowningirl III* and *Drowningirl III* too the prevailing trend of the melodic movement is descending, and made particularly striking by glissandi and chromaticisms).

In the music of the Secondo Intermezzo there is a gradual mutation of an electronic sample (taken from the repertoire of the group Pan Sonic) in its almost exclusively rhythmic and timbric dimensions. At first the sample seems merely to repeat itself cyclically, but subsequently it undergoes what is clearly a processual distortion. In the video an analogous phenomenon occurs in the Adagio in conjunction with the Ouarto Intermezzo. The two sections are combined so as to perform all the more effectively the function of a preparatory lull prior to the following section, Hellucination 2/3: Risingirl/Earpiercinabells, which on the musical plane is the expressive culmination of the whole work (this involves a mechanism common to all the arts, consisting in the insertion of a tranquil digression prior to the 'catastrophe', ensuring that the overall process of intensification is not entirely straightforward and predictable). Here drops of mercury appear on the screens – aggregating, disintegrating, in transformation – in ever increasing numbers, at ever greater speeds and with increasing synchronization between the three screens, until arriving at virtual saturation.

The one stark exception to the non-representative nature of the video component in An Index of Metals comes in the last scene, Cadenza, which portrays an enormous waste disposal utility-cement mixer where mountains of rubbish are continuously rotated. In this case too a degree of abstraction is achieved, not so much in the specific instant as in the diachronic scheme: the sequence is mounted as a series of loops and rendered cyclical and alien as if in a poetic echo of the fundamentally entropic cyclicity typical of Romitelli's style. Once the music has reached its climax in Hellucination 2/3: Risingirl/Earpiercingbells, it is the video which has to maintain the level of existential density during the few remaining minutes. This fragment is collocated in a work which otherwise keeps any tangible personal or collective experience at arm's length, and may perhaps allude – combining the conclusion in formal terms with the rubbish in terms of content – to the fate of humans and of all things. In the immediately preceding Finale the music had come to a certain harmonic and figural closure, returning – with a corresponding effect of repose – to the chord of G minor which served as the 'home' sonority in the *Introduzione*. But the *Cadenza* contradicts any apparent pacification: the music starts up again with a noisy rhapsody on electric guitar and bass (recycling a piece from Romitelli's Trash Tv Trance, 2002). while the video – following the shavings, flakes and blowtorch fusion in the Finale – actually represents trash itself. The symbolism is perfectly evident: even what, being cyclical, seems capable of go on immutably for ever is actually subject to degradation; even metal, the form of matter that seems most solid and incorruptible, deteriorates, not unlike the human frame. Thus also at the macroformal level *An Index of Metals* reveals the processuality we identified at the level of the individual sections, and tends, in fact, to entropy. If the work is simultaneously an abstract and an all too concrete 'requiem for matter' (Pachini 2011), this emerges in its overall temporal span and its multimedia integrality.

The category of corruption proves to be essential in interpreting An *Index of Metals* (and in Romitelli's poetics in general) in another sense too: not as a process but as an atemporal conceptual opposition, between what is pure and what is impure or spurious (at various levels). Romitelli and Pachini play the opposites off not only separately but also, more interestingly, as terms in a continuum. In the music this can be seen in the antithesis/synthesis between harmony which is either harmonic (tonal or spectral) or inharmonic (using chromaticisms, quarter tones, out of tune notes); between timbre which is either clear and clean or dirty, rough, grainy; between traditional acoustic instrumentation and its modern counterpart which is amplified, electric, electronic (including the voice); between the classic academic manner and popular styles (rock, psychedelic). In the video, between the raw material of the filming and its elaboration and digital photographic deformation; between metal in its inalterable, mint state and fractures, corrosions, fusions, oxidizations; between clearcut, geometric lines and irregular, confused, magmatic forms: between the immaterial abstract and the material concrete; between the inorganic character of the first 47 minutes and the last 3 minutes of trash. In Lèkovich's text 'metal-miso', 'infected', 'corroded', 'incinerate', 'intoxicate' and so on are enunciated. On the aesthetic plane the multimedia admixture itself can be interpreted as corruption: of pure, 'absolute' music with the extraneous media of language and above all of video. The theatre has always been the venue in which music loses its purity (whether structural, stylistic, semiotic or social), and it is no coincidence if An Index of *Metals* was described as a 'video-opera' by its authors.

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