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Police: Anti-Psychiatry and Autonomia in 1970s Italian  
Audiovisual Media  
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## **The So-Called Groups of Militant Insanity Against the Video Police: Anti-Psychiatry and Autonomia in 1970s Italian Audiovisual Media**

This talk will explore how anti-psychiatry was taken up both in the Radio Alice free radio station and also cinematic culture in Italy in the 1970s, focusing on the work of Marco Bellocchio, Elio Petri, and especially Alberto Grifi. While Grifi's work *Anna* (Grifi and Sarchielli, 1975) is a relatively well-known anti-psychiatric video experiment, anti-psychiatry runs through his 1970s work in proximity with the creative autonomia movement that also gave rise to Radio Alice. However, these currents were already present in key works of Bellocchio and Petri, especially in *Fists in the Pocket* (Bellocchio, 1965), *Matti da slegare* (Fit to be Untied, 1975) and *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (Petri, 1971). In the latter sound is especially significant to indicate the inter-relations between class struggle, sexuality and psychic and emotional states and this would also form the basis for Radio Alice's reinvention of radio as a delirious machinery for a militant destabilisation of the state, capital and the mass media. If this militant insanity lost out in the end to the video police in the form of both mass arrests and the rise of Berlusconi's media empire, it provides a rich legacy for 21st century reinvention.

### ***Dini e Normalina* (1978)**

The title of this talk comes from an extraordinary film by Alberto Grifi, a filmmaker very close to the Creative Autonomia movement and with a specific interest in the antipsychiatry movement. The film is part agit-prop militant cinema and part documentary on the international meeting against repression held in Bologna in the wake of the shutting down of Radio Alice and the imprisonment or exile of its main animators as part of a broader crackdown on the Autonomia movement under the guise of anti-terrorism. The film presents a radical strategy on the part of the 'videopolice' to extract dissent at its roots and restore normality, presented in terms of psychiatric repression and hence in an anti-psychiatric framework. While unfortunately it is difficult to obtain a subtitled copy of the film, it is worth watching an excerpt to show the emphasis put on the media assemblage by means of which this 'normalisation' takes place: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kwl1pP5Yju8>

## The Roots of Italian Antipsychiatry

To fully grasp what is going on in this film it is necessary to go back over a decade, that of the hot 1970s in Italy that was strongly expressed in film and audiovisual culture, and indeed even further to the roots of Italian anti-psychiatry itself in the pioneering work of Franco Basaglia.

Basaglia, now widely known as 'the man who closed the asylums' (See Foot, 2015), was a psychiatrist with a strong educational background in phenomenological and existential philosophy, especially the work of Heidegger and Sartre. His studies also engaged with new critiques of psychiatric institutions such as the work of Erving Goffman (*Asylums*, 1961) and Michel Foucault (*Madness and Civilisation*, 1960). When he arrived at his first posting as director of the mental hospital at Gorizia in 1961, at that time a typically archaic and brutal mental asylum (Italian psychiatry and the state having been resistant to even the modest reforms that had already taken place in other contexts), he was disgusted by what he found there: 'locked doors only partly successful in muffling the weeping and screams of the patients, many of them lying nude and powerless in their excrement' (Basaglia in Davidson, Rakfeldt and Strauss, 2015). He then set out on a project of 'de-institutionalisation' which proceeded step by step to remove all of the disciplinary apparatus of the asylum one measure at a time, a process he referred to as 'the institution negated'. While this mirrored tendencies and critiques of psychiatry in the US, Great Britain and France, it was pursued as an almost guerrilla struggle by Basaglia, ultimately leading to the passing of a law in 1978 to not only dismantle and outlaw all existing asylums but prevent their future reinstatement. The implementation of this law, however, took at least two decades.

What was notable about his strategy was the way it was conducted within the very system it was setting out to destroy; Basaglia held a position of power as the director of a regional asylum, originally considered a dead end job of no significance and hence providing the opportunity to dismantle not only the Gorizia asylum but the asylum system as a whole. This proceeded through the attraction of a strong team of young psychiatrists who would work at Gorizia temporarily and then continue this work in other hospitals, thereby virally disseminating Basaglia's project of de-institutionalisation. According to Felix Guattari, in Basaglia's key text, *The Institution Negated*, 'A war of liberation,

waged for ten years, to overthrow the institution is presented to us in terms of militant struggle [...] There is straightaway a violent refusal of all scientific pseudo neutrality in this domain which is, for the authors, eminently political' (Guattari, 1996, 43). For Basaglia and his colleagues, drawing on the existentialist and anti-psychiatric sources already mentioned, most of the symptoms of mental illness were in fact the effects of the asylum system itself and the alienation of control and autonomy it enforced was seen as leading directly to mental alienation; in other words, mental illness was presented as a social and above all a political issue. The project of opening the walls of the asylum to the outside in every possible respect also made it a hub of activism bringing it into contact with the rising wave of radical politics in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s to the extent that the contestation over the asylum and its de-institutionalisation became a metaphor for revolutionary politics more generally. This was especially the case for the Autonomia movement which, at least in its more creative currents, directly took on some key aspects of anti-psychiatry in its formulation of a revolutionary project at least as much about subjectivity as it was about objective class relations.

### **Guattari and the Cinema of Anti Psychiatry**

As Gary Genosko has indicated (Genosko, 2009, p.134), Felix Guattari devoted frustratingly few pieces of writing to the cinema in general or individual films, yet what he did write is exemplary in its use of a symptomatological approach, relatively free of the vestigial auteurism of Deleuze's cinema books. This is particularly apparent in the short essay, 'The Poor Man's Couch' (Guattari 1996, pp.155-166), in which Guattari claims that cinema provides a type of mass equivalent of the psychoanalytic cure. For this reason, psychoanalysts are singularly unable to grasp cinematic symptomatologies since the cinema constitutes 'a normalization of the social imaginary that is irreducible to familialist and Oedipal models' (p. 155). The shift from the reductive Freudian readings of semantics to the Lacanian structuralist readings in terms of the signifier are, for Guattari, no great advance in psychoanalytic attempts to diagnose the cinema. Disputing especially Metz's approach to the cinema as being structured in a similar manner to the Lacanian unconscious 'like a language' through an assembly of syntagmatic chains, Guattari argues that cinema's 'montage of a-signifying semiotic chains of intensities, movements and multiplicities

fundamentally tends to free it from the signifying grid' (p.161). This is not to say that Guattari has a utopian view of cinema, which he in fact says is just as repressive as psychoanalysis, only in a completely different manner. What cinema, at least in its commercial forms, offers is a machinic, 'inexpensive drug' (p. 162) that, in its own way, works on the unconscious. Instead of paying for a professional witness as in psychoanalysis, at the cinema, the audience pays less money to be 'invaded by subjective arrangements with blurry contours [...] that, in principle, have no lasting effects' (p. 163). In practice what is enacted by cinema does have effects in that it models forms of subjective mutation, which remain as traces of the cinematic 'session', just as other narcotics do. As a machinic narcotic, cinema is a giant and much more effective process for the production of normalization than the psychoanalytic cure but, paradoxically, it does this via a process of complete subjective deterritorialization. For this reason, cinema is both 'the best and the worst' that modern capitalist societies offer their subjects and contains within its machinic production of subjectivity liberating potentials: 'a film that could shake free of its function of adaptational drugging could have unimaginable liberating effects on an entirely different scale to those produced by books' (p.164). This is because cinematic language is a living language that while for the most part turned towards repressive ends is uniquely able to capture and express processes of psychic semiotization and therefore could become 'a cinema of combat, attacking dominant values in the present state of things' (p.165).

Guattari's examples range from obscure anti-psychiatric documentaries, to the works of then nascent American auteurs like David Lynch and Terence Malick. What Guattari's cinematic examples share is that in his reading of them, they all elaborate non-normative processes of desire, capable in principle of countering the normalization processes of both commercial cinema and psychoanalysis. For example, Guattari indicates several examples that could constitute a cinema of anti-psychiatry or sees in a film like Malick's *Badlands* (1973), a profound process of amour fou or schizo-desire worthy of the best productions of the surrealists (Guattari, 1996, pp.167-176). But cinema in the 1970s was full of such cinematic expressions of schizo-desire and amour fou of which it will only be possible to chart a few pertinent examples.

One arena to begin is in what could be called anti-psychiatric documentaries such as *Asylum* (Robinson, 1972) which Guattari discusses in passing along with Ken Loach's fictional *Family Life* (1971)

as 'indirectly reveal[ing] an anti-psychiatric current' for a 'substantial audience' (Guattari, 1996, p.177). Guattari was much less ambivalently enthusiastic about the March 11 Collective film *Matti da slegare (Fit to be Untied)*, (Silvano Agnosti, Marco Bellocchio, Sandro Petraglia, Stefano Rulli, 1975), which documented the experience of one of Franco Basaglia's anti-institutional projects in the Parma Psychiatric hospital. Guattari was considerably more sympathetic to Basaglia than to R. D. Laing, and related more to the former in his own practice at La Borde clinic, devoting a significant review essay to his work in which he labelled him affirmatively as a 'Guerrilla Psychiatrist' (Guattari, 1996b, pp.42-45). What is notable in this film is that it goes further in affirming the speech and experience of all the participants and, unlike in *Asylum*, this is able to impact on the very production of the film itself. According to Guattari, 'it is the people involved who really get the chance to speak [...] children, educators, psychiatrists, militant groups [...] each sequence, each shot, was collectively discussed during the editing' (Guattari 1996a, pp.178-179). What is striking in this film is the integration of the perspectives of psychiatric patients and industrial workers, and the ways relations are set up between them beyond institutional boundaries. For Guattari this film is exemplary not only of the potentials of anti-psychiatry but also of minor cinema, in its potential to exceed other modes of political communication in becoming a " 'cinema of combat' [or] a form of expression and struggle" (pp.178, 179) against dominant representations. In this regard it is worth noting that the collective's subsequent project was a TV Series oriented around cinema itself, *La macchina cinema (The Cinema Machine)*, (1979), in which instead of a psychiatric institution, it was a whole range of aspects of the institutional machinery and subjective experience of cinema that were critically examined as an industrial production of subjectivity for the masses, very much in line with Guattari's insights about 'The Poor Man's Couch'.

### **Anti-Psychiatric Tendencies in Italian Cinema: Marco Bellocchio and Elio Petri**

The involvement of Bellocchio in this project was hardly accidental as he had been pursuing a broadly anti-psychiatric approach throughout his fictional film career beginning most explosively with his first film *Fists in the Pocket* (1965). Throughout Bellocchio's films of the 1960s and 70s,

social critique is filtered through the subjective experience of repression and alienation at the hands of a range of institutional structures such as the family (*Fist in the Pockets*), the education system (*In the Name of the Father*, 1971), the press (*Slap the Monster on Page One*, 1972) and the Army (*Victory March*, 1976). While all of these films have anti-psychiatric tendencies to lesser or greater extents it is really *Fists in the Pockets* that these are most explicitly and provocatively expressed. Centred around a bourgeois family of a blind mother and four adult children, this is a film that examines the family through a focus on gesture as implied by the title. Rather than a simple ideological critique, the film shows the contradictory and hypocritical desires traversing the family structure as Alessandro engineers the 'accidental' deaths first of his mother then of his disabled brother. He does this 'for' his older brother Augusto, the only one who has a seemingly 'normal' life with outside work and a fiancée. Augusto's repressed desires to be liberated from his 'abnormal' family are enacted by his younger brother, who ultimately dies himself from an epileptic seizure, which his sister, who he has also attempted to kill, does nothing about. (52.30, killing of the mother <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yixxb-9oAeY>).

As Karl Schoonover puts it: 'The deaths in this film occur through surprisingly gentle and unspectacular means: the tap of a finger, the gentle coaxing of a head slipped underwater and, finally, the decision to stay in bed and do nothing. According to Bellocchio's view of the film, 'violence arises and breeds in a refusal to accept reality' (2006). This gestural madness which reaches its apotheosis in Alessandro's epileptic seizure, was reflected in the bold cinematic style of the film which involved abrupt and nonrealist editing, at times almost approaching Soviet avant-garde practices of 'intellectual montage'. However, the montage here is not confined to a purely political or social plane but operates on a plane of desire and psychoses, echoing and amplifying the familial tensions within the scenario as a form of collective articulation of group psychosis. Later Bellocchio would not only make the already mentioned collective anti psychiatric film *Fit to be Untied* but also enter into collective psychoanalysis with the controversial therapist Marco Fagioli, who subsequently collaborated on several of Bellocchio's films in the 1980s.

Elio Petri was another filmmaker working at the same time who in several films emphasised the intertwining of political power, psychosis and sexual desires. This amalgam was barely visible in his work in the

1950s and 60s, although the sci fi film *The Tenth Victim* (1965) a kind of contemporary urban Hunger Games in which contestants must kill or be killed by randomly selected others was a premonition of his future development. In the 1970s he made a series of four films which, as in the work of Bellocchio, explored the interconnections between social institutions, desire and power. The most well-known of these was *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion* (1970), which showed a police inspector who violently murders his mistress and who initially manipulates the evidence so a student radical will be suspected. He then leads the inquiry back towards himself, ultimately even confessing to the crime to his superiors who nevertheless exonerate him since he is above suspicion. This was his intention in the first place:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RitklgHbRYk> ;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfXZVqdLKcE> Like *Fists in the Pocket*, this is a study of proto-Fascism, as facilitated by contemporary authoritarian institutions in a 'liberal' society. If both the psychology and the politics are fairly rudimentary, what is of more interest is the soundtrack and editing style which again reflects the excessive subjective experience presented within the film.

In *Lulu the Tool* (*La Class Operaio va in Paradiso*) there is a much more astute political analysis that is directly linked to an exploration of a schizoid personality. The main character is initially a much despised over-productive worker, whose excessive speed leads to the raising of production quotas at the expense of the workers' health and safety. However, when he himself suffers an industrial accident, he engages with the radical students who have been protesting outside the factory and adopts their radical critique which has consequences for both his working and personal life; he gets fired from the factory and his girlfriend and son leave him, leading to a mental disintegration. This is prefigured in key scenes in which Lulu visits his friend and former worker Militina. In this scene in particular, there is an almost documentary quality and a political analysis of madness, clearly influenced by Basaglia's ideas: (36.00): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY-vtJnymEU0> . Lulu's machinic schizoid subjectivity is indicated largely via discordant sound that goes from the machines on the factory floor to ultimately invade his entire psyche and his various relations with work, sexuality, and politics which become progressively destabilised and characterised by noise.

Perhaps the apotheosis of this proximity between anti-psychiatry, schizoanalysis and autonomist politics was the film *Anna* (1975),



directed by Alberto Grifi and Massimo Sarchielli, even if it was situated far from any recognizable clinical practice. One day, in the late 1960s, the actor Massimo Sarchielli met Anna near Piazza Navona in Rome. Anna was a sixteen year old girl, pregnant and visibly under the influence of drugs; escaping from several suicide attempts and constant depressive periods, she had nevertheless rejected the interventions of reform institutions and had recently escaped from the last of these. Sarchielli decided to take care of her and took her to his house. Initially taking notes on the girl's behaviour, he began to video her, with the idea of making an eventual film. Since he was an inexperienced director, he asked his friend Alberto Grifi to collaborate on the project. Grifi was already becoming known as an innovative and experimental filmmaker, making films related to the situationist critique of the spectacle, and conducting early experiments in video and special effects. Later he would direct the film *Il Festival del proletariato giovanile al Parco Lambro* (The Festival of Proletarian Youth at Parco Lambro, 1976) documenting a key moment of the developing youth counter culture and the Creative Autonomia movement. Grifi agreed to participate and they started filming in 1972 and 1973 amassing eleven hours of video recordings, part of which was transferred to 16mm using a device of Grifi's own construction, and resulting in a film of almost four hours. This was released in 1975 to a highly controversial reception, due to the intimacy, apparent extreme realism and at the same time manipulation both of the film and the events transpiring in front of the camera. Located somewhere between the inheritance of Italian Neorealism (Grifi had extensive contact with Cesare Zavattini, 'the old man of Italian Neorealism') and yet to be developed reality television, this film is an uncomfortable document of an intersubjective 'therapeutic' process, that is highly troubling. Referring to one of the most notorious sequences in the film of Anna in the shower while heavily pregnant, Andréa Picard wrote: 'Troubling in more ways than one, [certain images] sometimes surpass their aesthetic worth and lodge themselves into the annals of memory where they continue to reverberate and disturb long after being encountered' (2013, n.p.). But it would be a mistake to simply see in this film the prolongation of the aesthetics of Neorealism and direct cinema. It is also a work that defies genres in its combination of documentation and re-enactment, and also one in which the technologies used are highly significant. Grifi had already demonstrated his interests in bricolage through the assembly of found footage in films like *Verifica Incerta* (1965) which prefigured a whole wave of experimental film and

later video art with its humorous repetitions of title and action sequences from numerous Hollywood films. Such experimentation was continued in projects like *Transfert per camera verso Virulenta* (1967) and *Orgonauti, Evivva!* (1970) which experimented with special effects such as colour diffraction and spatial distortion via mirrors and filters, again using equipment that Grifi had developed himself:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuRGr8TsoBY> . This experimentation was not limited to images, however, but also involved the soundtrack with up to seven different sound channels being superimposed in the earlier film: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O\\_RtVGpHaq0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_RtVGpHaq0) . In the latter film, the attempt was rather to recreate via distorted imagery the effects of ingesting psychotropic substances. Certainly, Grifi moved away from this pure artistic research in the 1970s, in Annamaria Licciardello's words rejecting 'any interest in artistic activities that are not capable of disturbing the "meaningless" reality of everyday life' (Licciardello, 2008, p.189). It is in this lineage that, despite appearances, *Anna* needs to be understood in the following terms: 'Anna is a true and proper cinematographic experiment that constitutes a unique moment in the history of Italian cinema, and a limit-example of direct cinema' (Licciardello, 2008, p.189). Certainly this brought the project into dialogue with questions of realism inherited from both direct cinema and Neorealism, but above all it was the fabrication of a kind of machinery to convert the extremity of subjectivity and everyday life that Anna represented, into durational imagery, in an entirely new way, given the primitive development of analog video at this moment in time. Grifi was fully aware of these technological conditions, which he saw as indispensable to the production of a film that was able to do away with the usual cinematic conditions of the cost of film stock, lighting, and production crews, thereby allowing for an entirely autonomous mode of production, and level of intimacy with the film's protagonists.

*Anna* is therefore as much a socio-political portrait of its time as a psychological one, and rather constitutes the first step in the 'anthropology of disobedience' that Grifi would continue to develop around events on the borders of the Autonomia movement itself, and tellingly by means of a feminist intervention into a mass anti-psychiatric meeting in 1977 (Lia, 1977):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76v4nlo8Ddk> . Contrary to the work of Marco Bellochio, seen by Gary Genosko as the epitome of Guattarian minor cinema, Grifi's work took place on the frontlines of Creative

Autonomia itself, resulting in such delirious titles as the already mentioned *Dinni e la Normalina*. As such this work traces both the phenomenon of Autonomia and its new subjective practices, as well as their subsequent repression. A process that was directly related to the experience of the Bologna free radio station, Radio Alice.

### **The Media Ecology of Radio Alice**

Italy's first free pirate radio station, Bologna's Radio Alice, clearly derived its name from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, but this naming was no mere accident; in part a reference to Gilles Deleuze's reading of Lewis Carroll and nonsense in *The Logic of Sense* (Deleuze, 1990), the name Alice announced this radio's desire to go beyond the rational limits of communication and politics in the directions of a surrealistic play with sense and nonsense, to produce a desiring form of political communication in which poetic delirium would have as much of a place as political events, or further, a space in which false information could produce real events. What was at stake was not the mere expression of a political line but the invention of new forms of communication drawing on sources as diverse as the historical artistic avant-gardes, Deleuze and Guattarian philosophy, situationist practice and of course *Alice in Wonderland* itself.

In this context it is worth asking why Alice was invoked as the name of the first, and most significant of the free radio stations. The choice of the name Alice had several meanings for the animators of Radio Alice; as a figure of both youthful curiosity and femininity but also and more crucially as a reference to nonsense, paradox and unconscious desires. In a recent reflection on Radio Alice, its former animators write: 'The choice of Lewis Carroll's fictional heroine was pointed; Alice was heavily linked to the world of feminine symbolism but also to the upside-down logic of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Next to Carroll, as a second godfather, the group selected the Deleuze of *The Logic of Sense* (1990), a book which deciphered the paradoxes of identity encountered by Carroll's heroine as a metaphor for the loss of identity (for Deleuze, Alice wanted to be outside all logic, and the mirror – as symbol of identity – had to be

continually crossed over)' (Berardi et al, 2009, p.78). The several tributaries flowing into the constitution of Radio Alice included the reinvention of the semiotic experimentation practiced by the historical avant-garde, already evident in the practice of the Metropolitan Indians, situationist media interventions and pranks and theoretical attempts to grasp the transformations both real and potential of technologically mediated communication in the work of Umberto Eco, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Jean Baudrillard. However, undoubtedly the key reference point was the schizoanalytic perspectives of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1984), whose machinic, molecular revolution, Alice attempted to materialize via the generation of a mode of expression that would cross between sense and nonsense, the personal and intimate and the social and collective, becoming a radical media ecology or in Deleuze and Guattari's terms a 'collective assemblage of enunciation'.

So how exactly did Alice employ nonsense as a form of technologically mediated mode of free communication? The point was first of all to open political communication to all those elements that would normally be excluded as non-political, whether because too personal, too banal, or too strange. According to its animators, Alice transmitted: 'music, news, blossoming gardens, rants, inventions, discoveries, recipes, horoscopes, magic potions [...] messages, massages, lies' (Berardi et al 2009: 82). This seemingly Borgesian impossible list in relation to the norms of radio contents was a deliberate attempt to exceed the limits of what radio mediated communication could become, rather than merely using radio as a megaphone for a pre-established politics; as observers like Eco noted at the time, the very openness to the banal and the absurd in fact was Alice's politics. More than this the reference to lies was far from accidental; one of the key ways Alice challenged existing modes of political discourse was to reject the idea of political communication as the revelation of 'political truth', by exposing the lies of power, and thus its serious pedagogical function. Instead, Alice made use of lies, in the form of ludic pranks such as impersonating key politicians, in order to provoke political events following the formula that 'false information can provoke real events'. It is clear to see that in these and other practices, Alice was clearly inspired by the desire to cross the looking glass in a Carrollian fashion, to employ paradox, nonsense and play to escape the well-worn rhetorics of stable political positions and to open the radio station up to the maximum of

unfiltered popular speech. Nevertheless, this was not simply a matter of play or comedy but the serious attempts to articulate the struggles of the Autonomia movement with a powerful means of communication and feedback, without any attempt to organize or control it. This is why Radio Alice was so demonized by the authorities as the amplifier of the movement, all the more suspect for its lack of adherence to norms of political organization, even those of the far left. As such Radio Alice was performing a type of translation of Carroll's *Alice*, but one that like Artaud's schizophrenic reading was also transforming its meaning; one could say that despite or maybe because of the proximity to a schizoanalytic reading of Alice, a new Alice emerged, Alice as a subversive, a revolutionary anti-psychiatric Alice, whose play with sense and nonsense was directly articulated to challenge the official, dominant semiosis of the state, media and conventional modes of political representation.