Chapter 5

Experiments with Media

With advancements in technology that occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century onward, the theater of narration joined the many other art forms and industries that explored ways media practices might enhance their work. In several instances the genre has transformed itself for established technologies: for example, airing productions in the format of uninterrupted televised specials on national networks. Narrators have also experimented with audiovideo enhancements more directly in actual productions to complement specific moments in their otherwise minimalist stage shows. In terms of new media, besides using it for publicity through social media sites, there has even been one production whose initial run largely took place on the internet: Daniele Timpano’s *Aldomorto*, debuting in 2012. Given the genre’s agility, inexpensive economics, and easy transportability, video, radio, and television have presented a wide range of possibilities to increase audience numbers. More than that, it has challenged narrators to consider what, for them, is the most important aspect of any given production, in order to enhance it or at least carry it through a new medium.

Reflecting the theater of narration’s genealogy via Jerzy Grotowski and even Bertolt Brecht, the genre works best with less invasive technology. One of the main arguments for a Poor Theater was in critical response to new technologies and the cinematizing of theater, while Brechtian epic traditions demand transparency in the use of apparatuses, in lieu of masking stage machinery. From Peter Brook to Eugenio Barba, subscribers to the idea that media projections do not necessarily enhance the intellectual power of visual spectacle in theater fall into two main scholarly conceptualizations of digital media and performance. One group, led by new media scholar Lev Manovich, conceives of technology as part of the artwork itself and, in many cases, its most innovative and creative aspect; the other insists that technology is but a means to express ideas. Given its link to the Poor Theater and Epic Theater traditions, it might not be surprising that the theater of narration would embrace a more spartan approach to media. As evident in Marco Baliani’s televised *Corpo di stato* (1998), however, it is surprising that when productions stray from this approach and attempt to compete with more
cinematic visions of a play, they are unable to deliver many of the genre’s hallmark attributes, including a sense of community and commonality. They are also strained as media products.

At the heart of this discussion is the relationship between live performance and so-called mediatized performance. No matter the involvement of technology in this practice known for its simplicity, the main lesson from the use of technology, whether it has enhanced as opposed to distracted from the raw text, is that it functions best when in the service of live performance. The most successful uses of media are when the additional instruments—a screen onstage or camera angles for television—do not take on a life of their own, but constantly support the dramaturgy of the narrator. The performance theorist Philip Auslander refuses to think of the two as competing binaries, as Grotowski did. Grotowski believed that the more live performance attempted to compete with mediatized performance, the greater it would fail; by contrast, Auslander emphasizes a historical and contingent reading of this relationship even while insisting on an unequivocal rivalry between varying media.\(^3\) Approaching the subject from a viewpoint of “cultural economy,” Auslander focuses on the competition between live performance and mediatized events, seeing the former as the perennial loser against cinema, and even more so against television and digital media. He acknowledges the defensive position taken up by theater aficionados, scholars, and critics, who insist that the intrinsic value and transcendence of a live performance experience is in its very resistance to commercialized media culture, though that is a specifically twentieth-century aspect of performance, since (mass) media culture is a more recent phenomenon. One reason Auslander sees this logic as untenable, however, is that media and performance have become blurred to the point where ontological differences between the two are less clear.\(^4\)

This tension raises the stakes for the generally unspectacular theater of narration and its rapport with media. During a televised production, there is not necessarily a blurring between the live and mediated performance, but those that are successful as televised performances privilege and serve the live productions in a utilitarian way that downplays competition between the two forms. Auslander begins to move away from the rigid binary of theater/commercial media when he re-places performance and media in an almost dialectical rapport. Although he does not arrive at this conclusion, his theoretical arrangement reveals that one problem with binary-staked arguments surrounding performance and media is hermeneutical. An economic approach, whether cultural or financial, would not offer a particularly nuanced scale on which to weigh performance and media either. It would similarly point to the fact that they should not be weighed against each other but considered with respect to one another. Analyzing how the theater of narration works in a variety of ways with media offers a study of a minimal-ist theater practice that tactfully experiments with ways in which media can enhance performance without ever claiming or attempting to be dependent
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on that media. All of the productions around which this chapter centers demonstrate a variety of media uses in the theater of narration. Investigating how the genre incorporates media in staged productions, and how performances translate across different media, this chapter considers a measure of success that involves neither monetary nor cultural capital but, rather, concerns how explorations across new media reference and defer to the live performance.

There is a further duality with which to reckon: the opposition between orality and literacy, as discussed in chapter 3 with respect to Giovanni Nencioni’s distinctions of the parlato. Generally, the two modes of communication compete as a binary, or even a hierarchy, with literacy widely praised as the more sophisticated form. The advent of visual, technological, and digital media, from the cinema and television to the internet, presents an additional dimension in considering the journey of orality from spoken word to written text and now into new technologies. With the addition of new media in the theater of narration, orality competes not only with literacy but also with new modes of visuality, as well as more varied, hyperlinked and interactive types of prose. These primary, secondary, and tertiary oralities do not travel in one direction; they go back and forth to each other, mediated by each other, transforming the notion of a pure unmediated state of orality into an anachronistic reflection.

This chapter begins with an analysis of technological media in a live performance, which occurs in the theater of narration with occasional frequency, particularly since the new millennium, but is by no means ubiquitous in the genre. Some examples include the use of projected still images, some famous, some personal, as in Baliani’s Corpo di stato; there is also the use of voice-over, as in Ascanio Celestini’s Pueblo (2017), as well as the use of projected video superimposed on the actor and/or interacting with the performer, as in Laura Curino’s Il signore del cane nero: Storie su Enrico Mattei (2010). It is noteworthy, however, that some productions that directly address states of technology refused to share their stages with it. Marco Paolini’s #Antropocene (2017) explicitly addresses the loneliness of the internet age, yet his costars are a full orchestra onstage plus the famous Italian rapper Frankie hi-nrg mc, without any visual special effects. To explore the ways in which media enhancement can unthreateningly bolster the intimate minimalism in the theater of narration, an examination of projected still and moving images and enhanced sound in Laura Curino’s Santa Bàrbera (2005) offers a dynamic case study. Curino was particularly successful in enlivening the play’s complex feminist narrative, notably concerning concepts of the voice through media.

Following this discussion, the chapter turns to the presence of the theater of narration on Italian television through national public service broadcasting in order to examine the types of creative decisions deployed to make televisual style serve the live performance nature of the genre. A comparative investigation best demonstrates variances in this process, first in Paolini’s Vajont and second in Baliani’s Corpo di stato, which provide contrasting case
studies that first aired in the 1990s. Whether present onstage or creating a new method for distribution, the use of technology in the theater of narration offers another dimension in which this already hybrid practice can adjust to and embrace different media potentialities. For a monologist genre, technology becomes both a way for narrators to expand their audience and another voice with which they must contend in their dialogic practice.

Multiple Media Performance in *Santa Bàrbera*

Laura Curino’s *Santa Bàrbera* (which debuted in 2005 and is still performed in repertory; fig. 19), a production that makes significant use of sound and visual technologies, exemplifies how media and technology can function onstage. In the piece, Curino implements video projections of a modern city to offer a pathway between modern life and the story of the fourth-century saint. This decision is helpful, but not crucial to understanding the parallel. She also uses a microphone and manipulates her voice, demonstrating an essential technology in the production for its ability to amplify a feminist narrative that adds new dimensions to verbal language. In a further effort to connect this centuries-old story to contemporary experiences, Curino highlights the many extratextual layers present in *Santa Bàrbera*: from the medieval writings of Jacopo da Varazze, who chronicled the saint’s story, to the sixteenth-century frescos of Lorenzo Lotto, which retell Bàrbera’s tale on the walls of a chapel.6 Notably, she incorporates a manifesto from the contemporary subculture world of “ravers” to pose a contrast with the antiquated language that evokes those older texts.

Throughout the production, the characteristics that define the theater of narration are still intact: the minimalist set; the unobtrusive costume; the solo performer who is also the author; the direct address; the occasional commentary or autobiographical reference. Diverging from this simplicity, Curino occasionally amplifies the volume of her voice through a microphone that reaches piercingly loud levels, in addition to projecting film, photographs, and a digital montage of morphing colors and shapes behind her (reminiscent of the old colorful geometric screen savers). These choices create an additional dimension that augments various ideas or themes. Most notably, with the microphone Curino is able to emphasize feminist leitmotifs, playing with different registers and sounds that do not always arrive at comprehensible language. Suddenly the piece about a fourth-century saint becomes an avant-garde political work, rich in its theoretical possibilities. In using technology to heighten the contemporary relevance of Bàrbera’s story, Curino deploys these various media effects as instruments of subversive gestures.

Throughout the play Curino indirectly pays homage to feminist artists who, coming out of 1968, explored nonlinguistic, gestural means of communication. These actions were widely prevalent across the West, including
in Italy, where grassroots feminism took place in the public sphere and was expressed in forms that were inherently theatrical, not simply discursive or linguistic. Italian feminism of the era explicitly engaged the specific national situation with goals that ranged from the juridical (e.g., the legal right to divorce, or elective abortion) to the theoretical (e.g., the concept of sexual difference, or the “pay for housework” campaign), but it was also deeply in conversation with international currents, most notably American, French, and British feminist practices and thought.

These collaborations and inspirations were reciprocal, as renowned Living Theater artist Judith Malina demonstrates when she writes in her diaries about a play that she saw in Italy in which the women refused to speak, drawing attention to the extent to which masculine rhetoric dominated their language. In lieu of their live voices, they used physical language and a tape recording to tell their story. For Anglo-American audiences, such an observation might seem rooted in the second-wave feminism of the 1960s through the early 1980s, but these arguments about gendered language and sexual difference are still prevalent today in Italian feminist thought. These emphases also help illuminate the feminist implications in Curino’s choices by substantiating her use of technology as a tool to articulate a female voice that those in power have historically silenced.

In 2005, Teatro Donizetti in Bergamo commissioned Curino and fellow Settimo company member Roberto Tarasco to write *Santa Bàrbera* for part

Fig. 19. Laura Curino in *Santa Bàrbera* (Bergamo, ca. 2005). Photograph by Gianfranco Rota. Courtesy of Laura Curino and Federico Negro.
of a series they were revisiting called *Altri percorsi* (*Other Paths*). The theater launched the series as a twenty-fifth “birthday” celebration from the day it first billed *Altri percorsi*. In 1980, as in 2005, the endeavor was as important for the Donizetti as it was for new theater practices in Italy, since it both mirrored the desire to uncover connections to local territories and, relatedly, indicated the theater’s direct involvement with several local associations interested in regional promotion.

Creating a cross-form palimpsest of sorts, Curino and Tarasco based the script on their studies of a sequence of sixteenth-century frescos about Saint Bàrbera painted by Lotto in Trescore Balneario, a northern Italian town approximately ten miles west of Bergamo. The frescoes, in turn, were based on a story in the thirteenth-century *La leggenda aurea* (*The Golden Legend*) by Varazze. As the play explores, Bàrbera is a beautiful young woman whose ardently pagan father of considerable wealth keeps her cloistered in their home, protected, in his view, from the evils in the world, particularly her many potential suitors. He leaves on a business trip, directing workers to build a tower in which to keep her like Rapunzel. While he is gone, her sisterly best friend Giuliana introduces her to Christianity, and she soon becomes a convert. When her father returns, he is horrified and, in consultation with the town prefect, subjects her to many tortures and eventually executes her by his own hand.

One way *Santa Bàrbera* pushes against conventional boundaries is in its interweaving of multiple media, not just modern audiovisual technology but also the fourth-century hagiography through a thirteenth-century legend depicted in sixteenth-century frescos. To an extent, a parallel characteristic is common in the theater of narration, as when a story in a given text operates within its own binary: it promotes a core simplicity by reproducing various social rituals and narratives; at the same time, it embodies a postmodernist poetics through its complex self-referentiality. The practice is more than mere narration because its process is dialectical, combining ancient modes of storytelling with postmodern theatrical ideas to create a new practice entirely its own. Curino’s vast array of media only contributes to this. In addition to exploring Varazze’s rendition and Lotto’s frescos of Santa Bàrbera’s life, Curino gives an entirely contemporary layer to the voice of her heroine by intertwining much of the alternative and relatively little-known Raver’s Manifesto, a text attributed to Maria Pike and hailed as an authentic voice of the subculture gatherings. In Curino’s production, the sequence in which she recites excerpts from the manifesto is among the most technologically rigorous. The combination of audiovisual media with the contemporary slang in the Raver’s Manifesto exemplify how Curino embraces technology to amplify her feminist interpretation of the story.

Echoing a specific moment grounded in the 1970s when psychoanalysis and feminist thought were a particularly fruitful pairing, Hélène Cixous’s concepts of language and sound from her seminal essay, “The Laugh of the
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Medusa,” are still pertinent decades later and help to reveal important intricacies in Curino’s production. In terms of the essay’s structure, Cixous’s own formal hybridity connects critical commentary with direct address and autobiography. Though Cixous’s text was not intended for performance in the way that Curino’s piece is, it has an innately performative quality as she asserts how writing is a means for women to claim autonomy. In the oft-cited opening line, “Woman must write her self,” Cixous suggests that writing begins with the body and connects the act of writing to the psychoanalytic conception of the body as a site of early memory, ongoing experience, and biological drives and desires, all of which shape and have the potential to disrupt the formation of the female subject. In her exploration of different literary styles that might (almost literally) flesh out the writer, she dramatizes what she argues is an innate fluctuation and lack of fixedness in corporeal existence.

Just as one could claim that the performance Judith Malina witnessed, that of the women who refused to utter language, was reactionary and thus dependent, one could also argue that Cixous’s essay supports the idea that phallocentric forms were what pushed women writers toward a breaking up of forms in order to develop the possibility of what might be designated as a “female” mode of practice. As feminist performance scholar Elaine Aston points out, such a suggestion problematically allows the concept of feminism to be determined by patriarchy. After all, why should such binaries bound Cixous’s—and Curino’s—stylistic choices and experimental instincts, which might derive from a postmodern inclination or another impulse entirely? Rather, their feminism reflects not an insurgence against rigidity but an exploration that emanated from other sources that are not absolutely patriarchal or phalloreferential but instead are at least partially aesthetic. Similarly, Bàrbera’s desire to pursue Christianity had little to do with her cloistered existence, a point Curino’s play barely acknowledges. Early on in the play, she brags to Giuliana about her father’s affection. Even while Giuliana points out his domineering behavior, Bàrbera is less rebellious or interested in a conversation that might bring about a more heightened awareness of her captivity than she is curious about religion.

Cixous’s psychoanalytic framework invokes temporal landscapes that women must traverse in order to reaccess what they have lost in their journey toward adulthood, or, more specifically, womanhood. Woman has the difficult task of returning from afar, from a place she inhabited before her body was “frigidified.” The body is crucial in second-wave feminist theory, of course, and continues to be an important subject in Italian feminist discourse. In 1970s Italy the idea of female subjectivity as a perspective that linked women to a sphere of feelings grew more complex. It began to lose its pejorative connotations because it engaged a line of thinking that refused a comparative denigration of feminine subjectivity to masculine subjectivity: that is, female subjectivity, with its relationship to emotion, was not regarded now as inferior
to male subjectivity, though it did remain in a realm of interiority, turning away from the goal of liberating women. Some circles of Italian feminists, such as the Milan Bookstore Collective, argued that there was a contradiction inherent in the idea of emancipation, because it was a juridical principle and not one that reflected a state of being, as the title of one of the most important books of the era attests, quoting Simone Weil: “Non credere di avere dei diritti” (Don’t think you have any rights). Freedom does not ensure equality. For the authors in Milan, the discourse on female subjectivity needed to shift to sexual difference in order for liberation to even have a chance.

That Bàrbera must withstand carnal tortures before her death questions distinctions between equality and liberation with respect to the somatic. As Curino narrates, “So then the prefect, full of fury, commanded that her flesh be cruelly tortured . . . so that her whole body bleeds.” While Christ aids Bàrbera physically, emotionally, and mentally, the prefect persistently attacks her body. Overnight her sores heal, so again he orders her body thrashed and torn and commands that hot iron plates be placed on her flesh. When Giuliana begins to pray for her friend, the prefect then condemns her body to flames as well. When Bàrbera miraculously extinguishes them with her breath, the prefect orders that both women have their breasts cut off. Certainly both male and female martyrs underwent much carnal torture, but the female body is further emphasized in this hagiography, as Diòscoro, Bàrbera’s father, had originally locked her away to hide her beauty. Her body is the reason for her punishment, and because of it she approaches death.

Cixous’s invocation of the “frigidified” body suggests that in childhood, girls experience a degree of liberation until society instills its repressive mores. Bàrbera’s youth, however, is characterized by the tight control of her father, and she only expresses autonomy when she baptizes herself by dunking her head in the fountain of her garden. Curino punctuates this moment with laughter, loose physical movements such as raising her arms up in a hallelujah gesture, and the melodious and carefree folk version of “Over the Rainbow” sung by the Hawaiian musician Israel Kamakawiwo’ole (recorded in 1988; fig. 19). Curino, as Bàrbera, sways to the music and dances, performing her pleasure in one of the more physically acted moments in the entire play. Through Kamakawiwo’ole’s audio recording, Curino uses a different medium to convey a newly “thawed out” body free of restraints and, in an offering to the story of the saint, sings along at points in Bàrbera’s voice. On the screen in the background, colorful abstract geometrical shapes swirl and converge together, reminiscent of a hallucinogenic dream, weaving in the altered states of mind that the 1960s culture connotes. (Though this is surely unintentional, because the images also recall popular screen savers from the 1990s they highlight the link between technology and the oneiric that was perhaps there in those early days of home computers.) Through her embodiment of Bàrbera, Curino performs what approaches a state of religious ecstasy through the baptism, which Curino codes through the music.
as a freewheeling instance of countercultural liberation. While narrative theater productions do occasionally feature music, rarely does it have the force to speak for the narrator/character, but here, as when Malina witnessed the production with recorded voices in Faenza, Curino ushers in a new voice—a mediated one—that conveys a state previously foreign to Bàrbera. The next time Bàrbera experiences a similarly ecstatic event, Curino supplements her voice technologically, using the microphone to recite excerpts from the Raver’s Manifesto.

Cultural historians view the contemporary rave movement as an extension of the 1960s psychedelic music and drug culture updated with techno-dance music that replaces the rock and reggae of the 1960s. The raver motto, “PLUR,” stands for “Peace Love Unity Respect,” the nonviolent ideals ubiquitous in the 1960s, and one could argue that, like Bàrbera, rave culture is widely misunderstood and unfairly condemned. Curino capitalizes on this undercurrent to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of her story when Bàrbera begins to withstand her torture. Together, both Giuliana (voicing Jesus’s teachings) and Bàrbera (in her state of saintly forgiveness) convey the PLUR ideals. Giuliana—whom Curino parallels to Jesus as an outcast, with her modern punk-raver attire replete with piercings and a dog collar—ultimately liberates Bàrbera through the ecstatic PLUR message expressed in the manifesto.

Cixous’s idea that writing as woman means writing the body directly involves Curino in one of the few narrative theater performances that lacks overt autobiographical references. Cixous insists that “by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure.” Curino takes back this ailing figure by developing a rhythmic and mediated vocal strength that culminates with her recitation of the Raver’s Manifesto, using a microphone to bellow this climactic chant throughout the performance space. When the prefect attempts to physically diminish Bàrbera, the tenor of Curino’s voice builds toward an ecstatic sequence that precedes Bàrbera’s death. Importantly, she first maintains the English that the manifesto was written in rather than translating it. In doing so, she works past the fact that her audiences will for the most part likely catch only some but not all of the meaning of the manifesto. Rather, she privileges the other sensory (namely auditory and visual) experiences that comprise the scene: “Our emotional state of choice is Ecstasy. / Our nourishment of choice is Love. / Our addiction of choice is technology. / Our religion of choice is music.” She then repeats the text in Italian, but her voice grows so loud, ramped up and distorted by the microphone, that the words become an echo of themselves. Rather, she performs the “addiction” of technology and “religion” of music by demonstrating how they are indispensable and intertwined in this ecstatic moment of freedom for Bàrbera, when she is no longer bound by corporeal restrictions.
In this instance, the use of the microphone and the psychedelic back-projection function as the preoedipal breaking up of symbolic order (language) even though language is among its conduits. Curino’s vocal performance paves the path for transcendence when the words’ distorted repetitions serve as instruments for sound and voice, like the female voice that soars across Cixous’s essay. When woman speaks, “she doesn’t ‘speak,’ she throws herself forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body.” Curino’s body, and the bodies of the audience members, reverberate through her voice, charged with a language that commands its own sounds, rhetoric, and codes, invoking a contemporary subcultural text written by a woman, Maria Pike, in celebration of rave’s various ideals. Curino’s appropriation of the text within the world of the play further demonstrates, perhaps finally and climactically, the third-wave inclusiveness of her feminism through a topic dominant in second-wave inquiry: that of the body. As she announces “our” utopian principles, she nods to the intersectionality of third-wave feminism, which encompasses not only women but also other marginalized groups. The choice of the text also emphasizes that Curino is speaking about and addressing youth.

As is common in the theater of narration, Curino’s relationship to language is very specific. In this piece, as she unintentionally honors Cixous’s invitation, she creates what feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero suggested was a new language, or way of communicating. Cixous’s exhortation that women must write faces a serious challenge in Cavarero’s arguments about gendered language. Woman, Cavarero asserts, must “speak herself, think herself, and represent herself as a subject,” yet “woman is not the subject of her language. Her language is not hers, therefore she speaks and represents herself in a language which is not hers, that is, through the categories of the language of the other.” Curino, however, as a writer and especially as a performer, is in command of her language and finds a way to “write woman” through the use of audiovisual media. While media have been used to various ends within the theater of narration, the example of Curino’s Santa Bàrbera demonstrates a specific function in which audiovisual technology becomes a means to express long-held feminist ideas about the vexed relationship between women and language.

Translating Theater for Television

Television as a mode of exhibition is still a rarity in the theater of narration compared to the many live theatrical productions televised at any time of year around the country. Only a handful of narrative theater plays have been transmitted live (and occasionally taped), and they tend to be the larger
successes, though the overall success of those plays is certainly buttressed by the recognition gained through broadcast. While the live broadcasts of theatrical productions in movie theaters has been popular recently, often by major companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company or by major Broadway musicals, the intimacy of watching live theater amid the comforts and distractions of one’s own home is a specific situation. In the case of the theater of narration, it amplifies the subjectivity and importance of one’s own experiences as entryways into understanding events that had national consequences.

Paolini’s *Vajont* (aired live on October 9, 1997, the anniversary of the 1963 tragedy, on RAI2; fig. 20) and Baliani’s *Corpo di stato* (aired live on May 9, 1998, the anniversary of Moro’s 1978 assassination, also on RAI2) both appeared on national television and offer very different examples of the challenges in translating the theater of narration into the medium of television. Analyzing them side by side demonstrates that the most engaging moments on television are those in which the camera functions in the service of the performance, rather than attempting to enhance it. This does not mean that the apparatus needs to remain hidden or that the home audience should ignore it altogether. There are a number of important, reflexive shots in Paolini’s production (and others) in which the cameras catch each other as they pan or cut from Paolini to show reaction shots from the audience or the dam behind

![Fig. 20. Marco Paolini in the *Vajont* performance televised by RAI (1997). In this video still, the camera televising the image also captures a second camera in the bottom right closer to Paolini, standing, who has his back to it. Additionally, this Brechtian shot exposes the audience, seating arrangement, and lighting rigs.](image)
him as he references it. In doing so, they reveal the gaffers’ scaffolding that carries the lighting rig, the raked seating, and the cameras and sound equipment. When the production team translates a theatrical piece into a televisial format without trying to make it a grand cinematic experience, they preserve the sense of community so crucial to the theater of narration.

Given that one central aspect of the theater of narration is its pedagogic ability to encourage ordinary people to reflect on and critique both major and minor events in national history from local perspectives, it has much in common with the origins of Italian television broadcasting. While the theater of narration is grounded in intellectual rigor, narrators also intend for it to be relevant and appeal to popular groups. In the early period of television in Italy, a related socially progressive vision unfolds through the ubiquity of theater, literary adaptations, and historical dramas that were frequently broadcast on national airwaves. Indeed, stretching further back, the promulgation of classical Italian texts and “great histories” is associated with the very forming of Italy as a nation as late as 1860, and its attempt to unify its regions under the umbrella of the Italian state. While the theater of narration is not a divisive practice, one way it differs from these nationally unifying endeavors is that even in plays that appear to celebrate local and national histories (Curino’s Olivetti plays, for example), there is always an urge to explore the past from different, underrepresented angles in order to create a more varied holistic understanding.

One consistent trend on Italian television, which has remained despite major changes over the decades in both programming and the addition of cable and satellite networks, is its identity as a vehicle of public service, not just entertainment. In part thanks to this continued civic practice, when narrative theater productions air nationally, they are programmed to appeal to a wide-reaching public sphere. Even though various corporate and political decisions eventually extinguished many of the inclusive, civic initiatives that flourished during the early years of Italian television, the more recent, ongoing presence of the theater of narration on television since 1997 indicates a continued commitment toward public service broadcasting. For narrators, these initiatives have a concrete outcome on their plays, enabling them to reach many more people than they can while touring the country.

In addition to exploring the pedagogic angle inherent in public service, contextualizing televised narrative theater within the history of Italian television sheds light on some of the complicated politics behind the performances. Given that specific political parties were affiliated with certain stations, the fact that narrators have aired their shows on a variety of channels demonstrates the delicate shifts in critique that guide their style compared to someone with more obvious political intent, such as Dario Fo. Most experts categorize the development of Italian television in the postwar period, when it quickly became a household staple, into three phases: the state monopoly from 1954 to 1975, the rise of private broadcasting from 1975 to 1992, and
the duopoly of the state and Fininvest media holding company from 1992 to 2012, when the rise of the internet and the apparent end of Silvio Berlusconi’s on-again off-again stints as prime minister of Italy ushered in a final politicized phase.

As owner of Fininvest, and thus the largest shareholder of Mediaset, Italy’s largest commercial broadcaster, which owns three of seven national channels (Italia 1, Rete 4, and Canale 5), Berlusconi enjoyed years of media monopoly. As prime minister, the range of his influence through televised media was disturbing (to say nothing of the various print media that his company also owned). He maintained supreme control over the airwaves through Fininvest while also, as head of state, presiding over the three state-owned channels: RAI1, RAI2, and RAI3. Only the national La7 remained independent. During this period, narrative theater productions mostly aired on La7, the one national channel not controlled by the government or by Berlusconi’s private media company, suggesting an awareness among narrators for the need to separate from the domineering politics of Berlusconi’s leadership. Turning back to the periodization of Italian television, it was during its first two periods that, unburdened by aggressive corporate and political tactics for power, the basic ideals of a public sphere in television flourished. This ideal is the one to which the televised narrative theater works aspire.

**Phase 1: The State and TV (1954–75)**

In the first phase of Italian television, which comprises the invention of the state-owned public service broadcaster Radio Audizioni Italiane, or Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) in 1954, political leaders explored the extent to which the new medium could affect public sentiments and educate the masses by extending their cultural horizons. Media scholar Milly Buonanno describes the composition of the RAI board in the 1950s as mainly intellectuals and managers who combined a predominant humanist-literary training with a moderate Catholic political orientation. She asserts that this first group of directors was more interested in how this new form could influence the masses than they were with its role as a public service. They immediately recognized its power to affect large swaths of people. Adding to this line of thinking, film scholar Elena Dagrada argues that, because the Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana, or DC) dominated politics for the entirety of this first period, the party was able to shape public broadcasting to advocate their views and policies and thereby maintain the Christian Democrats’ hold on power. These are alarming prospects even if the underlying paternalistic objective was still to broaden the cultural horizons of citizens in order to unify, modernize, and democratize the country.

Historians widely credit Sergio Pugliese, the first director of programming at RAI (from 1953 to 1965) and also a playwright and theater aficionado, with the strong presence of theater both taped and live on Italian TV. In
weekly Friday evening broadcasts, Pugliese and his team introduced viewers to many classics, from the Greeks to the modern greats such as Pirandello, beginning with Goldoni’s one-act *L’osteria della posta* on January 3, 1954, soon followed by *Romeo and Juliet*. These canonical choices have led some scholars, including Buonanno, Aldo Grasso, and Damiana Spadaro, to argue that his decisions spoke to a pedagogic inclination, to a RAI leadership that delighted in the thought of how television would help Italy become a more cultivated nation.  

Indeed, these efforts were popular and reached a much wider audience than normally had the means or inclination to attend theatrical performances. Televised theatrical productions were popular in both cities and rural towns with millions of spectators across Italy, in what journalist-turned-scholar Emilio Pozzi refers to as the “golden years” for theater. Broadcasting theater led to the articulation of a medium-specific televisual language. An almost trial-and-error exploration of theater on cameras intended for TV helped to define the parameters of televisual communication and entertainment. RAI programming directors experimented with format and developed several different modes of representing theater on TV. These mainly included direct transmission, in which little changes from the stage version; translation, in which the text and production is designed only for television; and adaptations, in which the play is highly altered and serves as a type of metatext.  

The theater of narration has almost always aired as direct transmission, but translation between the two media is nonetheless crucial. The success of Paolini’s televised *Vajont* proved that it is possible for even a minimalist style of theater to transcend the stage and nonetheless attract millions of viewers while formally changing very little. The spectacularism of performing in front of the actual dam, however, was an important decision in the translation of the show for television.  

Pozzi understands the early years of programming as less pedagogical and more experimental, arguing that Pugliese and his team searched for an authentic mode of communication that was specific to TV. Pugliese and his colleague, Carlo Terron, were well aware that TV required its own language, just like cinema, and that there is a tension among the televisual technology, cinematic representation, and live performance. Over time Pugliese began to form opinions about what type of performances were more adaptable. He thought that because of framing, plays with fewer characters, such as those from the eighteenth century, were better suited for TV than the Roman or Greek classics with large choruses were. Considering the physical dimensions of screens at the time, he believed the viewers at home could better accept an image that encompassed only a small number of characters.  

Another attribute that developed out of attempts to translate theater for television, and one that has much in common with the mechanisms in the theater of narration, is hybridity. The history of theater on TV in Italy is also the history of hybrid forms, from the *teleromanzo* (miniseries) to the
**teleinchiesta.** The program *Teatro inchiesta*, which premiered on November 10, 1966, was a theatrical reconstruction of historical or current events within a specifically televisual language in which an omniscient voice-over guides the audience through a nonlinear story replete with flashbacks. Today this format’s legacy in Italy is visible through the fusion of crime drama with reality TV in shows about missing persons and in some types of narrativized investigative journalism. It is hard not to see similarities with the theater of narration, especially with those productions that some call civic theater, such as *Vajont* and *Corpo di stato*. The mix of storytelling and mystery in these televised plays—not of how the story ends, but an alternative perspective from which it is told—provides a level of drama and suspense similar to mystery novels. Even though the genre clearly comes from theater, and actually in part because its origins are in stage performances, on TV the theater of narration continues a tradition of programming from RAI’s earliest days.

Concerning the adaptation of drama that moves from theatrical performance to televised production, plays are irrevocably and profoundly changed to create a hybridization of the two forms. The end result is neither theater nor television but a *teledramma*. These types of developments are of utmost importance because of their cohesive value. In her essay reconstructing the origins of domestic television drama, Buonanno argues that the *sceneggiato* (not just a screenplay but a “dramatized novel” or fiction specifically adapted for TV) was a crucial aspect of the “nation-building” strategy commonly associated with the beginning of Italian TV because of how it nationalized the Italian language in a country of regional dialects. The *teledrama* also deserves acknowledgment for its ability to convey key historical events and canonical literary texts. To frame the idea more concisely, RAI promoted interconnection and nationality in the postwar climate through programs that discussed a wide range of issues via a universally accessible service. This landscape of Italian TV was shaped by executives who developed the public broadcasting service with a catholic array of programs, from immensely popular quiz shows such as *Campanile sera* or *Lascia o raddoppia?* to news programs and drama.

This type of programming continued with the creation of more stations. In 1961, with the launch of the second national channel, RAI2, the new director, Ettore Bernabei (ex-editor of the Christian Democratic newspaper *Il Popolo*) also emphasized informational, cultural, and educational programs. Pedagogical programming was thus part of television from the beginning, which makes the medium’s development through this first period significant in understanding the theater of narration on TV, since the practice challenges many nationalist discourses by uprooting and reexamining histories that are widely considered accepted truths. The theater of narration, however, does not break with the tradition of promoting national unity just because it might be more dissident. Even as the practice interrogates the dynamics between region and nation and challenges dominant historical narratives by
redefining them, it is still possible through the genre to promote a narrative of cultural unity and cooperation in its televised form.

**Phase 2: Political Parties and TV (1975–92)**

In the second era of Italian television, which was subject to a distribution of political influence known as lottizzazione, the emergence of other stations challenged the dominant programming schemes. As a result of Reform Law 103 in 1975, which aimed to address pluralism of information, lottizzazione evolved as political parties, managers, and journalists shared positions of power in broadcasting. While the DC held on to RAI1, the Socialist Party took control of RAI2, and as late as 1987 the Communist Party ran RAI3. The three main political parties, armed with their own channels, regarded RAI’s public role as one where each party could establish its own cultural and political influence, challenging the notion that public service media could enhance democratic practices. By this time, those interested in the potential of television, whether political, cultural, or technological, advanced a more sophisticated concept of public service, articulating its prospects in two main ways: first in terms of access, and second in terms of content.

Despite the widespread criticism of lottizzazione, it nonetheless promoted a plurality of voices (even if they did not talk to one another), which is ultimately a positive step for democratic practices and public service. Given these polarizing perspectives, the dominant view of television critics examining this period is that while lottizzazione came about precisely to instill plurality, it ultimately clashed with the ideal of public service by fragmenting the whole system among partisans who did not interact with each other, thus closing the door to productive exchanges. As people began to better understand the communicative reach of television, it was clearly too risky to leave it entirely in the hands of a single political party. But as there was no discussion between the networks, and as they were so divided across party lines, the system did not really manage to integrate a plurality of voices. Even though more voices reached more of the public, they still spoke independently, encouraging division rather than a spirit of national unity through open dialogue.

Although the televisual landscape was significantly different by the time the theater of narration began to appear with some regularity on TV, this broad history, with questions about plurality of voices and integration of perspectives, sets up a perspective from which to view the theater of narration. Its inherent qualities, especially its desire to put different outlooks into dialogue and challenge dominant views, stand in sharp contrast with the fragmentation of Italian television networks, yet its presence on various channels over the years represents a successful attempt at both representing and integrating diverse voices, exactly what the stage practice aims to do across major and minor venues throughout Italy.

By the 1990s, an environment of duopoly in which the three RAI state-owned channels and the three Fininvest (Berlusconi’s umbrella company) channels dominated the airwaves, making for a new kind of media homogeneity during the years when Berlusconi was prime minister. Unsurprisingly, in an era when high ratings generated advertising revenue and Italy was close to thirty years away from the era of long uninterrupted programs, RAI had to battle the contradiction between its public service mission and commercial imperatives. Increasingly, programming that once sought to engage audiences intellectually was quartered off into a niche market, whereas entertainment programming became mainstream. Instead of a push toward “quality” programming, executives were drawn toward the latter because of revenue. As a result, RAI’s high audience share was related to its diminishing distinctiveness in an increasingly standardized and advertising-driven media market. In stark contrast, when narrative theater productions began to air on television, they almost never had commercial interruptions, as was common for televised theater in the early days of RAI. Any productions that implicitly challenged the growth in commercialization and privatization of the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors, as the theater of narration did, put their revenue sources at risk. Its very presence, then, indicates a continued, if weakened, interest on behalf of RAI (or La7) to create a public sphere for serious conversation.

By this time, however, TV had almost fully lost its reputation as an instrument with educational possibilities; instead it was broadly seen as an integral part of the culture industry, which one could run as a competitive profitable business. It was amid this environment that the theater of narration entered its televisual era with the broadcast of Paolini’s Vajont on RAI2 on the thirty-fourth anniversary of the tragedy. The director of RAI2 in 1997 was Carlo Freccero, who had similar leadership qualities to Sergio Pugliese, the first director of RAI programming. After seeing Vajont in person, it was his idea that it could and should reach more people. Thanks to Freccero, other shows by Paolini, Laura Curino, Marco Baliani, Moni Ovadia, Giuliana Musso, Davide Enia, and Ascanio Celestini also soon appeared on that network or others. With these choices, which were only a fraction of RAI2’s programming, Freccero and his team slightly disassociated themselves from the commercial and financial imperatives brought on by private competition that had largely replaced public service and community-driven discussions. In this way, the theater of narration made an important contribution: the practice’s ongoing popularity demonstrates that a sizable audience is in fact interested in engaging with the nuanced and rigorous discourses the genre proposes. A close examination of two highly successful narrative theater pieces helps demonstrate how a successful translation from the stage to television preserves this quintessentially democratic goal.
In 2001, there was a major blockbuster film laden with special effects about the Vajont disaster, starring the well-known Italian actress Laura Morante as the journalist Tina Merlin. Titled *La diga del disonore* (*The Dam of Dishonor*; it was translated for release in France as *La folie des hommes* or *The Whim of Men*, which pointedly reflects the issues of blame and responsibility that Paolini takes up much more directly than the film, or even its Italian title, does), it dramatized the political corruption behind the tragedy that Paolini examines in his play. By industry standards, despite all its technological savvy and special effects of a digitized tsunami wiping out seven villages, the film was a flop. Meanwhile, the taping of Paolini’s show in 1997, with few constructed visual effects, was a great success both for him personally and for the theater of narration as a dramatic form, since it increased popular interest in the genre. In a loose parallel, Auslander notes that comedians and club owners in the 1980s were surprised to discover that viewers responded with a desire to see individuals perform live after seeing them perform on a TV show. In this instance, “mediatized performance became the referent for the live one.”

While *La diga del disonore* was just a tedious film that did not incite discussion or palpable interest, the televising of Paolini’s play actually boosted the live performances, as evidenced by his continued success with both *Vajont* and his other plays in theaters around the country and with many reappearances on TV. Several channels, including RAI2, RAI3, and La7, have shown his work to great critical acclaim, as the case of the *Il sergente* premiere in 2007 demonstrates. Over 1.2 million watched the show, or 5.5 percent of all viewers on the night it aired, which was a record for La7 and illustrates how televisual productions reached audiences far vaster than national theater tours could.

In the televised *Vajont*, a decision to build a stage in front of the actual dam added a startling affective dimension. While spectacular settings are not uncommon in televised productions of the theater of narration, their very presence suggests an effort to compensate for the genre’s lack of spectacle, even if its minimalist style is a characteristic that critics widely celebrate. Similarly, while Baliani has performed *Corpo di stato* in a plethora of humble locations, the televised version was set dramatically amid the ancient ruins of Rome in the heart of the city. The inherent drama in these sets adds a tactile realism to both the in-person and televised performances, but it also introduces risk. Media scholar Giorgio Simonelli notes that theater of narration plays often have moments of dramatic intrigue that include political-military dynamics fraught with cover-ups, as the genre embraces rereadings of history. Pointing out that 2 to 5 million viewers watch the theater of narration each time a production airs, he suggests that these theatrically televised events could be as frequent as once a month and even replace RAI2’s *Palcoscenico*, which only offers the same bland, homogenized theater productions that
fare poorly on both TV and in theaters. The contrast between the average televised theater production and a televised narrative theater production suggests that the genre is effective at translating itself for the small screen, even as it maintains its minimalist aesthetic. Part of this relates to its inherent hybridity, which allows for its adaptability to different forms and media, but most of its success is due to its emphasis on empowering spectators/viewers to reevaluate historical perspectives, privileging their point of view.

The use of spectacular settings has become a common characteristic of Paolini’s televised productions, but this is not necessarily true of the entire genre. For example, Giuliana Musso’s Nati in casa, which aired on RAI3 in 2004 and again in 2018 on RAI5, was taped during an intimate indoor production on a small stage with characteristic minimalism, rather than being staged in the birthing centers, hospitals, or Friulian mountains that are so much a part of her story. One of the risks inherent in favoring grandiose surroundings for television adaptations is that they set a visual standard, which might denigrate future productions that cannot meet such an expectation. Simonelli ties all of Paolini’s TV work inextricably back to the Vajont production. Since it aired on the anniversary of the tragedy and took place in front of the dam at the exact time of day the disaster occurred, the adaptation possessed an inherent drama that, because it was the first experience of the theater of narration on television, became part of the standard mode of presentation for the genre. For Simonelli, the emotional height of the piece has no match. Yet what makes the practice so successful in both its medial form and its stark live performances is the drama in the subject itself.

The argument that Vajont, as the very first theater of narration production to air on TV, reached unattainable heights places Paolini himself in a particularly difficult position, as if all of his future productions must meet the expectations he set with Vajont. To an extent, there is proof of this battle in many of his televised shows, which continue to take advantage of surroundings that are impossible for most live performances except in special circumstances and with significant funding. In Miserabili: Io e Margaret Thatcher (Miserables: Margaret Thatcher and I, which he began performing in various forms in 2006, and in a more final version by 2009), Paolini intertwines perspectives from both macro- and microeconomics to reflect on deregulation and the growth of precarious labor during the 1980s in Italy and elsewhere. It is a very typical narrative theater piece in the sense that Paolini rigorously researched the topic; he examines not a particular event but, rather, a specific historical period marked by economic change; there are moments of autobiography, especially via a character that he brings back from the earlier highly autobiographical piece Gli album; with the exception of the musicians, he is the sole performer onstage who speaks directly to the audience; and at the end of the show, he actually solicits comments from audience members (which was included in the live national broadcast), starting a conversation that will ideally carry on without him.
On November 9, 2009, the performance aired live and uninterrupted on the national station La7 (the only one historically not tied either to the government, like the RAI channels, or to Berlusconi’s private media companies) from the Taranto Container Terminal at the port of Taranto in one of the country’s most historic sites of economic trade, off the southern heel of the boot in Puglia. The containers themselves are industrial objects, fixtures of mundane everyday life, though here monumentalized through their staging. They also represent global trade, with all its fraught connotations. The symbolism of this location is powerful and affective too, conjuring a long view of historical trade and war as far back as the Second Punic War in the third century BC, when the Carthaginians and Romans fought to control Tarentum, through World War II, as a site of military operations. It adds to the production’s grandiosity as well as stimulating the visual sense, which normally receives much less attention in the theater of narration. Is Paolini chasing the ghost of *Vajont*? To some degree, yes. The Taranto port, despite its stature as a major source of trade, is not tantamount to the mountains of Vajont, where the actual tragedy took place though it is movingly allegorical. When *Vajont* portrayed its pathos in the spectacle of the set and surroundings, it recounted a deep and specific tragedy in Italian history with which the more ruminative thinking behind *Miserabili* cannot compete despite the thoughtful staging and location.

*Vajont*

Adhering to his typical working pattern, Paolini developed *Vajont* slowly, first performing it after dinner for friends in September 1993. By the time the production aired on RAI2 in 1997, he had presented it over two hundred times in a plethora of venues, many of them nontraditional (i.e., not theaters). In March 1994, less than six months after his first postdinner performance, he recorded a version of the play on the Milan-based left-leaning radio station Radio Popolare following an earlier theatrical performance. It was a moment that confirmed there was something special about the show. The radio program began around midnight and ended at 2:30 a.m., but to his surprise he maintained such a large audience that he accepted callers until 4 a.m. In addition to the obvious exposure to an audience that was not the typical mainstream theater audience, the radio broadcast also allowed Paolini to continue the exhibition of his show on his own terms in low-pressure situations. It gave him time to let the production grow and change in small ways and to understand it both in terms of its theatrical staging and in a language suitable for radio and eventually for television.

While his live show gained momentum through word of mouth, particularly in artistic and intellectual circles—people such as Carlo Freccero, the director of RAI2, attended a performance—Paolini still chose spaces that were nontraditional, rarely entering theaters. As he explains, this was not
because he was antiestablishment per se, but because he felt that the show worked better in more intimate venues. Within two weeks of accepting Freccero’s proposition to air the piece on national television, new offers were pouring in for Paolini to perform Vajont at festivals and in theaters nationwide. As he says, “Vajont exploded in theaters,” which he found distressing given his insistence on maintaining an intimacy in this story, an intimacy that also become a hallmark of the theater of narration. He admits that the televised performance killed something in the theatrical version, without elaborating on what precisely that was. What bothered him was probably his sudden and growing fame, because with more recognition, Paolini became an auteur of sorts. Yet part of his appeal after the televised performance was that same essence of intimacy that he held so sacred in his live performances.

The October 9, 1997, televised version of Vajont was a live direct transmission, not a taped or adapted-for-TV version of the original theater piece. Both Gabriele Vacis and Felice Cappa adapted the production for television. Cappa, who has had a career as a journalist, director, and overall collaborator with illustrious artists, including a number of narrators along with Dario Fo and Franca Rame, would go on to become a key figure in finessing the presence of many other televised theater of narration plays, including Olivetti and Corpo di stato. For this first and thus high-stakes production, the team decided that they would use seven cameras to alternate perspectives from center, left, and right, zooming in for close-ups of both the performer and audience, and would also take extreme long shots of the audience, the stage, and the surroundings, including, of course, the star: the dam itself. Most shots are direct medium or high angles, an important distinction from the confusing low angles in Baliani’s production, which took more liberty with cinematic aesthetics. One of the advantages of direct transmission is its incorporation of the physicality and sacredness of the actual stage, which the viewer sees on the screen. Everyday life, normalcy, and that conversational colloquial tone characteristic of the theater of narration are all also typical of live broadcast TV, working to the genre’s advantage.

The very first shot is of a paper map that centers on Venice and the surrounding area. The camera slowly zooms out and pans northwest to Longarone and Erto, two of the nearby towns affected by the disaster. This shot then dissolves from the paper map into several establishing landscape shots of the dam itself, zooming out into an extreme long daytime shot of the mountaintop, where the dam still exists, and panning to the valleys below. That shot then dissolves into a close-up of the dam at night, awash in floodlights. At this point the feed switches to live transmission from the recorded footage, and the audio begins to pick up the low hum of chatter and coughs as the audience awaits the beginning of the performance. All the while, the opening credits run. The camera pans to Paolini, shown with audience members in front of him and the dam lit behind him; he utters his first words in
the center of the frame. Until Paolini speaks, the only sounds are water trickling down rocks, and the rustles from the audience.

For the next minute, the camera follows his few movements on the stage, keeping him framed in the same way, occasionally switching to medium shots of audience members as he interacts with them by gesturing toward them and looking directly at them. A minute and a half into Paolini’s opening, archival images replace him as he provides voice-over, along with a shortened running text in subtitles, stating the bare facts of what happened exactly thirty-four years before. That first sequence of extra materials lasts thirty-six seconds before shifting back to Paolini. At one point his performance is superimposed over the wreckage. For the next four minutes the image of Paolini continues to be interrupted by old footage in clips of ten to twenty-five seconds. These patterns quickly turn redundant, but in their simplicity, they demonstrate how the televisual language has preserved the minimalism of the performance genre. The images of people recall found footage or documentary, and while they honor those local families, they also signal that in the unspectacular lives of ordinary people lies the key to the storia of the Vajont tragedy.

Unlike the experience of sitting in the audience, multiple camera setups allow the viewer at home to see Paolini from different angles and at different distances. Since the cameras also capture reaction shots from the audience at different moments throughout the production, they also allow the viewer an element of sharing and witnessing that mimics the collective experience of the in-person theatrical performance. The cameras imitate movements of the eye, but they surpass human vision when they offer close-ups of Paolini or fly toward the dam. Although the cameras may enhance and build on the live performance, they still reaffirm the in-person experience more than they try to go beyond it. The reference is still the stage performance, even if Paolini’s team must adapt and create a new televisual language.

The televised presentation does incorporate materials that are not present in the staged versions. Here, too, the decision was to streamline, offering only simple and minimal information. Early in the show, and contributing to the building momentum, there are several cuts to still images or archival newsreels: drawings of old maps, still photographs of the actual newspaper headlines that Paolini references, photographs from those newspapers, and old footage from the aftermath of the disaster. Most of these images appear in the first ten minutes, with decreasing frequency as the performance continues. Though this extra visual material is sporadic and unobtrusive, including such imagery, particularly of the flood’s aftermath, offers some benefits. As Grasso points out, it contributes to Paolini’s dexterity, since most contemporary audiences had either never witnessed those raw scenes, even in the newspapers, or had long since forgotten them. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, some of the photographs or reels may have even been censored.

Paolini, Vacis, Cappa, and their team thus found a way to utilize one of television’s main strengths—its potential for intimacy, which also happens
to be a key strength of the theater of narration. On stage such images and footage might distract, but on television, when they become the entire screen, they bring with them an immediacy and utility that works specifically for the medium without sacrificing the intimate qualities of the performance genre. The footage also establishes a scholarly tone that underlines the erudition of the genre and enhances its ties to microhistory. Showing these primary sources, the audience at home is exposed to the anthropological research that the genre both embraces and mimics. In one sequence of archival footage, people help an older woman walk over debris by holding her arms on either side. She is dressed in black, as though for mourning, and at one point she looks directly at the camera. The expressive pain that registers across her face in a shot of no more than three seconds is potent, if brief. This type of material capitalizes on the ways that TV can enhance or offer another dimension to the theater of narration without usurping what live performance can offer.

These sequences also show how real people personalize the event, a phenomenon microhistorians describe as witnessing the intimate affects of ordinary people. In the preface to his book on witchcraft, Carlo Ginzburg discusses how the “rich variety of individual attitudes and behavior” emerging from the sources so enveloped him that he risked losing sight of the larger project. He explains that “the principal characteristic of this documentation is its immediacy. . . . The voices of these peasants reach us directly, without barriers.” When the exhausted woman stares into the camera, filling the entire television screen at home, there is a new proximity to the Vajont disaster. Even if there were a screen onstage onto which Paolini projected the images, it would still only be a part of the audience’s focus, as other details of the theatrical experience frame any screens on a stage. By creating a televisial language through the inclusion of raw footage, however, Paolini and his team maintain a direct intimacy with the at-home audience that is different from his rapport with the audience before him at the site of a stage, while still preserving many of the characteristics of that encounter. Such a gesture also harks back to the public education efforts at the roots of early Italian television. In bringing this history of Vajont into the homes of so many and telling it in a new way twice over (i.e., the story itself offers new perspectives, and the medium of television revises the theatrical production), Paolini and his team demonstrate their continued commitment to public dialogues.

Corpo di stato

Just seven months after Vajont’s television debut in 1997, RAI broadcast live a performance of Baliani’s Corpo di stato on another important anniversary for Italians: May 9, 1998, marked twenty years since the Red Brigades assassinated former prime minister Aldo Moro and since the Mafia murdered anti-Mafia activist Peppino Impastato. In one of his most minimalist narrator roles, rarely adding even a single prop in his productions or donning any
suggestion of a costume, Baliani completely changed tactics for television by embracing technical adjustments to remarkable effect. At first glance, it might seem as though there are few differences between the stage-to-TV transitions of *Vajont* and *Corpo di stato*, yet there are several key modifications that result in one main distinction: Baliani and his team’s attempt to dramatize the production and its underlying ideas through televisual (ultimately cinematic) means, which largely detract and distract from the core of the piece. This is particularly surprising given that Paolini and Baliani shared some creative staff, most notably Cappa, who had demonstrated such deft handling of the transition from theater to television with *Vajont*. Reminiscent of Simonelli’s judgment of *Vajont* as spectacularly charged by emotion and novelty, Cappa seemingly competes with himself in this second attempt at televising the theater of narration by trying to enhance the emotional resonance of the show to surpass even that of *Vajont*.

In his review of RAI’s *Corpo di stato*, the critic Gualtiero Peirce at *La Repubblica* (Rome), the major national newspaper, addresses the comparison immediately. Quite simply, he states that Baliani’s piece did not create the same “magic” as Paolini’s. It did not create the same “televisual fusion.” He also notes that it had about half of the viewership as *Vajont*, which reached over a million sets (at an almost 7 percent market share). In his view, this discrepancy is partially due to the fact that *Vajont*’s tragic power stems from a natural disaster—the landslides that triggered the tsunami—while the tragedy in *Corpo di stato* is caused by humans and told in a very personal autobiographical manner. In Peirce’s reading, Paolini largely aims to correct that prevailing view of nature’s whimsy by providing evidence of human error. Meanwhile, the violence of the 1970s and particularly the dramatic kidnapping and eventual assassination of Moro are innately more dramatic, full of much more scheming and politics than is apparent in *Vajont* (though Paolini attempts to reveal much scheming and politics surrounding the building of the dam); and the charged killings are much more nationally resonant than the *Vajont* story, which took place in the distant Friulian Mountains of northeastern Italy.

Rather, the two main missteps with Baliani’s televised production revolve around its location and the camerawork. Instead of enhancing the theatrical experience or simply providing ways to let it seep through the images, the televised production competes with the performance through the hyperbolic background in the ancient government buildings of Augustus’s Forum. Worsening the situation, erratic and low-angle camera movements are all too frequently employed, in addition to the creation of long creeping shadows that are more typical of film noir and horror films, thanks to excessive floodlighting against the depths of night. A third potential issue is the extent to which the performance styles between Paolini and Baliani differ. Although both pieces address tragedies, Paolini has a more jovial accessible air, at least in the beginning of his story and later with comedic renditions of various personas, so that by the time he narrates the tragedy, the audience has an
affection for him. Baliani, on the other hand, is severe from beginning to end. That Corpo di stato has enjoyed much success on the stage for decades refutes such an assertion, so it appears that he was directed for the televised performance to embody a more stately, distant, and harsher presence. That persona is precisely the opposite of the demeanor typical of narrators, who are eager to communicate and work with their audiences, and specifically of Baliani, who in Corpo di stato typically presents an intimate and sympathetic side of a compassionate young man, achingly eager to do the right thing.

As the quintessential symbol of Rome and the political heart of the nation, there is a compelling rationale in the choice of the ruins, specifically the Forum of Augustus, just north of the Roman Forum, for Baliani’s live broadcast. It evokes the depths of the past as well as dramatic leitmotifs from his text, such as justice, betrayal, and human frailty. It also serves as a material contrast to the use of contemporary media, such as the soundtrack and photographic stills from the 1970s that appear in a brief interlude during Baliani’s stage performance on a screen upstage. The production opens in a beautifully lit panning shot of the ruins, with the Temple of Jupiter twinkling in the background. A textual overlay announces the live transmission from Augustus’s Forum. As a recording of the musician and political activist Joan Baez singing the old folk song “Fare Thee Well” begins, cameras switch to different shots—some offer close-ups, others provide panoramas—of the crumbling ancient structures.

The black sky hangs like a curtain in the background, playing a particularly important and surprising part in evoking the sense of a theater. As though it were the wings of a stage set, it both frames and cuts off the world in which the action takes place. As the camera pans to a luminous full moon overhead, it too evokes a single bright spotlight, and although floodlights and human-made equipment cast long shadows, the camera suggests that it is, rather, the work of the foreboding light that emanates from the sky. The opening is nothing short of spectacular, like the image of the dam in Vajont or the factories of Ivrea for RAI’s Camillo Olivetti, but unlike in those productions, here it is too poetic and abstract, clashing with and even upstaging the play. Baliani’s tale confronts a specific moment in the past, using autobiography critically as a way to analyze an unambiguously violent shared history. The Forum represents power and politics, the possibility of an ideal republic: the promise of democracy, with its brilliance but also its weaknesses, corruption, and downfall. It is also layered with centuries of myths, plays, novels, revised histories, personal visits, and various tales woven into its remaining structures in ways that are impossible to comprehend or disassociate fully. Such imbrication and invisible layering betray the directness of the genre. The theater of narration is concerned with new dialogues that uncover lesser-known facts, yet this location confounds that process with both mystery and overdetermined meaning.

Further, the space was not conducive to the in-person performance, forcing Baliani away from his audience members in order to thrust him closer to the cameras, or bringing him so absurdly close that he addressed only a
handful of spectators at a time. He complains in his published diaries how terrible it was at times to be unable to engage with the audience, as some of them were almost placed behind him so as to give the visual sense of community, even while he was directed to look only at the camera. This sense of community reveals more of an attempt than a successful execution. The producers clearly understood the importance of communal engagement for the piece, but functionally they were thinking only in terms of the visual presentation for the at-home viewers, and in fact alienated the actual audience onsite, which in turn affected Baliani. By comparison, Paolini looked at both the audience and the cameras throughout his performance, and the cameras also showed numerous audience reaction shots, which created community between performer, audience, and at-home spectator. According to Baliani, Maria Maglietta—his longtime partner both professionally and personally, who directed the piece—intimated that the production team was making decisions that were not consistent with the spirit of the text. She protested the location, citing its grandiloquence and rhetorical pedantry, but Cappa insisted. She did at least convince the producers to avoid the great staircase, where they considered having Baliani stand, looking down on the audience. Still, the producers found a way to incorporate the dramatic angles that a staircase would have created by placing the cameras low, so that everything seemed larger and looming, including Baliani. The end result was that an exquisite and important stage piece celebrated for its confessional intimacy was transformed into a televisual language cluttered with an ill-fitted baroque set instead of one that would have supported the mechanisms at work.

After a little over a minute into the opening sequence, the camera pans from a shot of the moon to the first image of Baliani. In a medium close-up, pillars of the ancient Forum frame him as he looks down directly at the camera with a stern expression (fig. 21). The camera here is angled low, making the ruins behind him appear even larger as he glares at the spectators watching from home. The actual audience present before him does not appear in the opening. Their experience is more akin to watching the taping of an episode with an actor who speaks to the apparatus that has drawn his attention away from them, rather than meeting at a midway point in which the narrator both acknowledges the audience and at times directly addresses the camera for the audience at home. Besides the location of the Forum, this technical aesthetic is one of the production’s most miscalculated choices. Like the low-level lighting, the low-angle shots are also reminiscent of horror and noir films that dramatically overwhelm the spectator through harsh angles to create imposing figures on screen. When the cameras draw Baliani to look down on them, he morphs into an Orwellian authority rather than the sympathetic voice working through a complicated history rife with personal political conflict that is his usual stage persona.

Helpfully, throughout the performance the cameras also capture Baliani in medium long shots that are framed at eye level, but despite his own instincts
and the protests of Maglietta, he was directed to speak almost exclusively to the camera, at the expense of the onsite audience. Perhaps Baliani, Cappa, and others (it appears that Maglietta, who pleaded a different argument, struggled to be heard) meant to convey the authority of the state, which is certainly a leitmotif in the play. While that logic might explain shooting the ruins and performer in such a haunting way, it is a manipulative choice. The formal differences between Vajont and Corpo di stato highlight the difficulty and risks in translating the theater of narration for television. By and large the productions are quite similar. Both embrace a spectacular space, use multiple cameras, incorporate archival footage or photographs, and maintain the primary focus on the narrator in a mode of direct address. Yet the slight differences with which Baliani’s team aimed to enhance the drama of the production reveal two very different productions: the stage and screen versions of Corpo di stato differ from one another as much as Vajont and Corpo di stato themselves do.

Finally, there are some narrators who experiment with a variety of media in the same piece, demonstrating a continued urge to revise, reinvent, and reinvest in the practice. Celestini exhibits a curiosity regarding technology and media that is particularly explorative. Besides regular appearances on
satirical programs or talk shows in which he frequently tests short excerpts of new projects, many of which then appear on his YouTube channel, as well as his range of film work (in the roles of both actor and director), on several occasions he has developed a stage production into a film that is truly independent from the live version; adding another layer, some of these works have aired on television. Celestini experiments with the developmental order of his creative projects, whether they are from theater to film (as most of his cases are), or from film to theater. His Temps Project is one of the best examples of the range of media within which he works. His choices fracture the project in many ways and offer different layers to his central idea about precarious pay and labor through documentary film, live performance, a novel, and a scrap book of sorts sold with the film that culls various research and preparation materials, including interviews and published editorials.

The performance, *Appunti per un film sulla lotta di classe*, with its string of anecdotes interspersed with live music, functions as a prequel to the film. Celestini narrates the content as much as he shares anecdotes from interviews relating to the film’s development. The performance’s publicity tagline casually states, “It is not a play, but is exactly what the title says it is” (i.e., “Notes for a Film on Class Struggle”). The line that follows the tag confounds this idea: “A play by and with Ascanio Celestini.” This project not only highlights Celestini’s journey across media but also demonstrates the evolving life of a text, exemplifying how the theater of narration can be read as a form that intrinsically questions what constitutes a play and explores how other media can contribute to this practice.

More broadly, the diverse use of media in the theater of narration reflects an inherent hybridity even within its rigid minimalist presentation. Whether present in a stage show, or used as a new way of exhibition, media interacts most effectively when it privileges the live production, unless it is completely rewritten and scripted for new media, like Celestini’s works. The visual imagery and sound in *Santa Bàrbera* help to clarify Curino’s complex rendering of female agency, while the cameras in *Vajont* offer an intimacy to the at-home spectator, who cannot smell the humidity in the air or choose when to shift their focus from Paolini to the mountainous region surrounding them. By contrast, Baliani’s production buries its most meaningful elements of human connection under distracting pretense by emphasizing the drama inherent in this play that confronts state-level terrorism, kidnapping, and assassination. The harsh camera angles from above and below draw long shadows, extending the reach of the tragic elements, whereas the play on its own is mostly concerned with the interiority and individual experience of such large-scale assaults. Narrators still experiment with media in their famously minimalist genre, but they also demonstrate that simplicity does not have to mean pretechnology. By deferring to the original stage production, a variety of media can draw attention in meaningful ways not to their own form but to the narrative performance.