

Daniela Cascella
A Special Day

A Special Day. The courtyard of an imposing high-rise building in Rome, 8th May 1938. In the morning the entire population of the building crowds downstairs and streams away to attend the parade that salutes the meeting of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. A mother and wife, who feels alone, and a man, who is alone, are the only people left in the building. That day they meet by chance. They tease each other, find complicity, they guess at each other's uneasiness and let their uneasiness be guessed - but do not voice it. They yell at each other and make love, and eventually return to their own paths. *A Special Day (Una giornata particolare)* is a film by Ettore Scola shot in 1977. The woman, Antonietta, is played by Sophia Loren; the man, Gabriele, is Marcello Mastroianni. Antonietta feels distant from Fascism, despite being overwhelmed by its rules that invade and force her family life; Gabriele, a gay radio broadcaster, has chosen to be distant from Fascism, he is about to be deported to Sardinia because of his anti-regime tendencies. The third main character of the film is radio. A haunting, persisting presence throughout the film. The sound of the radio broadcast, reporting the parade in a rhetorical, dull voice, runs across the audio track seamlessly. It fills the moments of silence, it overloads the moments of dialogue. As some sort of aural *deus ex machina* it interferes with, and simultaneously covers up and resolves tension. Radio functions as the zip between public and private space: it opens the former, it enwraps the latter.

The obsessive presence of radio underscores the film. Its sonic essence is as grey as the nuances of the film's photography, which was deliberately intended to appear 'faded', like a memory. It is a buzz, a heavy veil. There are moments in the film when you no longer know where the broadcast is coming from – realistically, it should be echoing across the courtyard from the gatehouse of the building. Instead, it feels like that the voice of the broadcast seeps through concrete walls and across open windows. From the sky, it lands on the terrace where Antonietta takes the washing to dry, haunts the rooms of the humble flat where the two meet. In the only cut in the continuum of the radio, voice appears, metaphorically, in the moments of breakthrough – when her grey glance glimpses a spark of hope, when he stops and stares still. ----- For Gregory Whitehead 'the truth is not in how your voice sounds, but in how it's cut'. The splice, in turn, sews an aural Frankenstein of memories, of unhinged stories, of silences. Allen S. Weiss captures the paradox of transmission: '...a universally public transmission is heard in the most private of circumstances; the thematic specificity of each individual broadcast, its imaginary scenario, is heard within an infinitely diverse set of nonspecific situations, different for each listener; the radio's putative shared solidarity of auditors in fact achieves their atomization as well as a reification of the imagination. [...] There exists a point, unlocalizable and mysterious, where listener and radio are indistinguishable. We therefore seek that realm where the voice reaches beyond its body beyond the shadow of its corporeal origins, to become a radically original sonic object.' ----- The paradox of public vs. private space disclosed by radio runs along silent histories, private lives and shared hopes. Glenn Gould titled his series of documentaries for radio *Solitude Trilogy* (1967-77): a palimpsest of voices, melodies, sounds, a polyphony of stories, half-heard and overheard, which ultimately voice nothing but loneliness – yet a shared one. Heinrich Böll's short story, *Murke's Collected Silences* (1955), is set for the most part in a broadcasting studio. The main character, Murke, works as an editor: he cuts and splices tapes. His task, within the timeframe of the story, is to cut all the portion of tapes in which a noted art critic pronounces the word 'God'. Only at the end of the story do we discover his own counter-search for a private form of spirituality – Murke collects portions of silent tapes, and plays them back at home. He eventually ends up asking his girlfriend to sit quiet and still, so that he can record her silences, with no cuts, to be played back in the special evenings of not so special days.

References, in order of appearance:

Ettore Scola, *Una giornata particolare* (A Special Day), film, 1977.

Gregory Whitehead, "Radio Play Is No Place. A Conversation Between Jérôme Noetinger and Gregory Whitehead", in *Experimental Sound and Radio*, edited by Allen S. Weiss, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, 2001. © MIT.

Allen S. Weiss, *Phantasmic Radio*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1995. © Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Glenn Gould, *Solitude Trilogy*, 3CD's, CBC, 1992.

Heinrich Böll, 'Murke's Collected Silences', in *The Stories of Heinrich Böll*, translated by Leila Vennewitz, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1986.