

Production, Circulation and Reception of Soviet Nonconformist
Culture in Italy (1957-1991): A Transnational Perspective

AND THERE IS NO LINE. THE FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH SOVIET ROCK MUSIC IN ITALY BETWEEN IMAGINATION AND CULTURAL POLICY IN THE TIMES OF PERESTROIKA

È LA LINEA NON C'È. IL PRIMO INCONTRO CON LA MUSICA ROCK SOVIETICA IN ITALIA: TRA
IMMAGINARIO E POLITICA CULTURALE AI TEMPI DELLA PERESTROJKA

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the encounter and reception of underground Soviet rock in Italy, focusing on a case study that firstly includes in the dynamics of reception the roles of imaginary and affect, reframing the concept of paratext in the field of performative and sound studies. The paper then focuses on the very first Soviet rock concert in Italy and the following initiatives that allowed Italian rock musicians to perform in Russia. It examines the cultural policy that enabled this contact and the role of CCCP Fedeli Alla Linea to prepare the expectations of the Italian audience to it. The paper deconstructs the line between underground and officiality in Pere-stroika time, showing how these contactless worlds present interesting similarities, including misunderstanding and exoticization through poetic strategies and expanding the concept of paratext as a blurring, ever-changing line.

Keywords: Soviet Rock; Underground Culture; CCCP Fedeli alla Linea; Perestroika; Italy.

Il saggio esplora l'incontro e la ricezione del rock underground sovietico in Italia, concentrandosi su un caso di studio che, in primo luogo, include nelle dinamiche di ricezione i ruoli dell'immaginario e dell'affettività, ridefinendo il concetto di paratesto nel campo degli studi performativi e sonori. Il saggio si concentra poi sul primissimo concerto rock sovietico in Italia e sulle successive iniziative che hanno permesso ai musicisti rock italiani di esibirsi in Russia. Esamina la politica culturale che ha reso possibile questo contatto e il ruolo dei CCCP Fedeli Alla Linea nel preparare le aspettative del pubblico italiano a tale evento. Il saggio decostruisce il confine tra underground e ufficialità nell'epoca della Perestrojka, mostrando come questi mondi apparentemente distanti presentino interessanti somiglianze, tra cui l'incomprensione e l'esotizzazione attraverso strategie poetiche, e ampliando il concetto di paratesto come una linea sfocata e in continua evoluzione.

Parole chiave: Rock sovietico; Cultura underground; CCCP Fedeli alla Linea; Perestrojka; Italia.

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Bologna. One can breathe an air of Russia. Many and varied signals from the Western cultural landscape inform us about the widespread need for a confrontation with the Soviet empire, but without the caricatured attitudes and deformations of the past. (Tondelli, “Punk, hammer and sickle” 186)

In November 1984 Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *enfant terrible* of Italian literature in the 1980s, begins with these words an article titled “Punk, hammer and sickle” in the weekly *L'Espresso*. Regardless of the naïve synecdoche of Russia used for the whole Soviet Union, ex-post the article is a remarkable precursor in Italy to the trend of rediscovering a European identity, the Eastern one, removed from history by the Cold War's division into blocs. Addressing the recovery of Eastern European and Soviet iconography in Western cinema, literature and music, and especially in young movements such as rock and punk, the writer mentions new-born West German pro-Leninist industrial rock bands with sonic aesthetics comparable to that of assembly lines and foundries. Although not particularly well-known in Italy, bands such as Fehlfarben were very famous in Germany and Berlin. Tondelli specifies that even before an improbable political decision, an aesthetic motive drives such choices:

1980s “Eastern Wind or philosovietism” appears above all as a problem of cultural identity, a wanting to come to terms with two thousand years of European culture that a few decades of division will certainly not suffice to erase; it is a need for adventure and discovery of something that, although close, is less affordable than any intercontinental journey [...]. We seem then to be faced with the strong need for an imaginary unity that becomes one with a kind of Europeanist ‘revanche’ against the American empire; and all this, paradoxically, out of a need for stability. (186)

Also in Soviet Union a quite specular longing existed, although in very different circumstances. Anthropologist Alexey Yurchak gave it the name of “imaginary West”, “imaginary elsewhere”, or simply *zagraniitsa* [abroad], a term “signifying an imaginary place that was simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic” (159). This notion was more of a projection towards an abstract “somewhere else” rather than a particular place and, partly due to the difficulty of cross-cultural contacts, Yurchak argues that Western cultures were often adapted, given a localized meaning. Yuri Lotman's theorisation of the *semiosphere* as a continuous process of semiosis between a normative core and a fluid periphery (Lotman and Clark, “On the Semiosphere”), hybridised with the “Other” could in this sense provide an insight into such aesthetics, but also into the ability of intertwining of official and underground culture. In exploring the dynamics during the late *perestroika* era, the swift transitions of some unofficial groups from underground to the stardom of popular culture was rather swift. Furthermore, to discuss about underground in the late soviet period is to discuss about lines of demarcations that blur and dissolve in the numerous pockets of freedom created within society. Several academics, including the contributors of NEP4DISSENT (Maryl et al.), recall the necessity in academia to abandon the binary view of Soviet society as a strictly state-owned lifestyle and to look instead at the blurred area between illicit antagonism and state propaganda inhabited by many, where the extreme fluidity of officiality and unofficiality of the time unfolded.

Exemplary in this case is the phenomenon of *hypernormalisation* as theorised by Yurchak to delineate the shared understanding within most of civil society that the system is inherently destined for failure, yet inescapable (57). Consequently, individuals find themselves to adopt assigned roles in a conspicuously hollow manner – predominantly performatively. This performativity, on the other hand, is seen by Yurchak as a void of meaning that allows for nuanced expressions and interpretations within the frame of formally conforming acts (75-76).

In popular culture as well as the unofficial one, specific expressive strategies in Soviet times to bypass state censorship and social taboos. The term *stëb* [*stem*] is nowadays used to describe one of them, a specific kind of sarcastic mockery based on the hyper-identification with an authoritarian structure or symbol, decontextualizing it in order to discredit it (Lipovetsky). The New Composers' *Sputnik of Love*, the New Artists' video art *Piratskoe Televidenie*, satirical art bands like *Srednerusskaia Vosvyschennost'* use different levels of such approach.

This interplay along several blurred lines during late Soviet times is at the premises of this paper's perspective and moves along the story of a case study happened in 1988–1989 in the rock scene between Soviet Union and Italy.

In Soviet Union, rock music greatly contributed to shape a certain imaginary West since the mid 1940s, with the circulation of *roentgenizdats* in the young counterculture circles of the '40s – the *stiliagi* – of unofficial local songs as well as Anglo-American music, especially rock-n-roll and jazz. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the USSR had developed an established rock movement that started to self-organize. The Leningrad Rock Club, the first in the USSR, was established in 1981 with the authorities' allowance, de facto to oversee the uncontrolled movement under the covert watchful eye of the KGB. Such clubs allowed rock bands to legally record and perform live for the first time, while enabling the government to monitor rock stars. The inaugural rock festival *Tbilisi-80* took place in this period (8 March 1980), while tv programs like *Muzykalny ring* [*The Music Ring*] made radio and television broadcasts available to certain groups. This thaw gave impetus to the second wave of Russian rock, especially the new wave Leningrad groups – Kino, Alisa, Obermaneken, Strannye Igry/Strange Games, and others. In 1983-1985, on the initiative of Konstantin Chernenko, amateur rock groups faced threats of imprisonment for private entrepreneurship in case of concerts without state monopolist supervision. On September 1984, the Moscow Cultural Section issued the Decree 361, prohibiting tape recordings of foreign and local rock including Kino, Akvarium, and many other bands already prominent among young Soviet audience: concerts of Resurrection, Bravo, and Metal Corrosion were stopped by the police, and some participants were even arrested. De facto, the inability of the government to contain the virus of rock would have become clear quite soon. With the beginning of *perestroika* and *glasnost'* in 1985, musicians had the opportunity to perform concerts without fear of criminal prosecution. Nautilus Pompilius, Zoopark and Brigada S became popular. In USSR cities, rock clubs, groups, and influential rock writers like Artemy Troitsky and Alexander Zhitinsky started to emerge, lead-

ing to major events like *Lituanika* (1985-1989), *Podolsk* (1987), and *SyRok* (1988). Following the traces of the early *stiliagi* taste, the prototype of rock music of the 80s was Anglo-American, including hard rock, heavy metal, new wave, punk rock, and post-punk. In general, classic rock bands often performed art songs with an acoustic guitar, often at unofficial concerts or apartment events. These bands were often almost the songwriter's accompaniment group, with a lyricist or music writer as the leader.

The transmission of Soviet rock beyond its immediate context posed a challenge due to its everyday and procedural nature. The predominantly verbal-based perspective persisted also in the *magnitizdat*, as Daughtry (30) contends that *magnitizdat* encompasses an activity (reproduction and distribution), a medium (the tape), and an object – a “text” that is a performance in itself. Unlike the GDR, in the Soviet Union a unique network emerged, involving individuals who reproduced, distributed, and sold underground cassettes in a widespread black market, providing access to fresh music from both within and occasionally from the West. Partially broadcasted on stations like Radio Liberty or Radio Free Europe, they were seldom exported, while bards and singer-songwriters found more success in reaching Western audiences through their poetic texts disseminated *tamizdats*. The absence of truly unofficial channels for music dissemination persisted until the legalisation of rock music, until when/which its export relied on private initiative of tourists and emigrants with relatively short and sparse ray of distribution. Prominent instances include musicologist and writer Vladimir Frumkin (1929–). Notably, Frumkin, who emigrated in 1980, released two collections of Bulat Okudžava's songs in 1980 and 1986, featuring musical annotations, Russian and English lyrics, and striking photographs. In 1986 American Joanna Stingray produced the album *Red Wave*, comprising smuggled recordings in the last two years of her visits to Leningrad and marking the first Western album to showcase Aquarium, Kino, Alice, and Strange Games.

Also in Italy, despite having seen a timid diffusion of *samizdat* since the Seventies and despite the exhibition of unofficial culture in the Venice Biennale of 1977 – the famous *Biennale del Dissenso* [Biennale of Dissent] –, Soviet music culture is predominantly mediated through official channels or imported by individual initiatives. A notable example is that of Gian Piero Piretto who, during his study trips to Eastern Europe, acquired records ranging from political speeches, classical and pop music to illegal records, and exchanged Italian pop tapes with less diffused local productions. The collection became the database for *Vaghe stelle dell'Orso* [Wandering Bear Stars], a Russian-Soviet music program with Sergio Ferrentino aired by Radio Popolare in Milan, from 1984 to 1989 (Verri). The first Italian publication on soviet rock music appears in Italy only in 1988 with *Compagno Rock*, the translation of A. Troitsky's famous book *Back in the U.S.S.R: The True Story of Rock in Russia* published a year before in English (Troitsky).

Moscow was quite diffident towards the then influential Italian Communist Party – even more with the Eurocommunist shift of PCI secretary Enrico Berlinguer, who at the 60th anniversary of

the Revolution at the Kremlin advised communist parties to abstain from interfering in domestic matters, emphasizing the risks of both uniformity and isolation – and direct contacts with soviet punk rock before the *perestroika*, as discussed, were rather scarce. The desire to listen beyond the iron curtain manifests itself in Italy at the beginning of the Eighties, introducing the country to its imagery before and besides soviet punk itself.

The Emilia-Romagna region, where Tondelli was born, has been adamantly Socialist since the second postwar: still nowadays, the toponomastic of its cities retain names such as Stalingrado, Yuri Gagarin, Ho Chi Min [*sic*], while the square of Cavriago, a small town close to Reggio Emilia, is still adorned with a bust of Lenin donated by the USSR Embassy.

From Reggio Emilia is also the music band interviewed in the *L'Espresso* article, as unequivocal evidence of the bold claim of by Tondelli's incipit. Their name, CCCP Fedeli alla linea, stands for the acronymous of USSR in Cyrillic as read in Italian [ci ci ci pi], followed by a specification "faithful to the line" (an allusion to the party line). Formed in Berlin in 1982 by singer Giovanni Lindo Ferretti and guitarist Massimo Zamboni and dissolved in 1990 after the fall of the wall, the band defined itself as an Emilian Melodic Music or Philosoviet Punk band, playing post-punk sonorities blended with regional ballroom music, Middle Eastern riffs and, rather expectedly, an almost hyper-trophic use of communist references and symbols in both lyrics and visual expression of the performances of Annarella Giudici (aka La benemerita *soubrette*) and Danilo Fatur (aka Artista del popolo), who animated their stage.

Imbued with what Lindo Ferretti defines "barbaric-futurist theatricality" and "pure constructivist soviet punk" (*Barbarico*), the histrionic nature of the band's lives requires indeed to approach CCCP more as a performative sonic experience than a punk concert in the traditional sense. In the brief conversation with Tondelli, the band specifies:

We choose the East for ethical and aesthetic reasons. To Western ephemerality we prefer the durable; to plastic, steel. What future for a Europe that cannot admit that Pankow, Warsaw, Prague are European cities in their own right? (...) We are pro-Soviet and not pro-Russian. We love the Asian Republics, we love Islam ... there is no central point of pro-Sovietism that fascinates us, the fascinations are multiple. (Tondelli, "Punk, hammer and sickle" 189)

In a later interview on national television, the group remarks again the lack of strict political adherence to the Soviet Union, chosen rather for ethical and aesthetical reason: "We are born in Reggio Emilia, which is the most philosoviet amongst the provinces of the American Empire [...] we don't want to be the parody of any philoamerican group nor of any Eastern Group: we are from Emilia Romagna and are philosoviet" ("Rockettari di tutto il mondo").

The bundling of regional, Soviet, Muslim and spiritual-existentialist references in symbols, costumes, collages, graphic works and performative actions creates a constellation able to extend a narrative that goes beyond the music itself. In sound studies, such ability of elements and experiences gravitating around sonic production, diffusion and fruition to create fictional trajec-

tories, new narratives and signification systems, is described as sonic fiction (Schulze 1). The sonic fiction created by CCCP is more conscious than the original afrofuturistic one but shares with it the necessity to articulate a possible alternative world that transcend the iron curtain towards an East that can be only imaginary. Speculating in line with the Soviet understanding of *zagranitsa*, the desire of contact with the imaginary elsewhere does not obliterate the propensity to inflect a local meaning to its representation but it makes it more real and tangible.

If we follow Yuri Lotman's semiotic model of culture in which artworks are examined as complex systems of signs or texts (*The Structure of the Artistic Text*), and thus read CCCP's music as such, we might consider as the constellation surrounding their music and generating sonic fiction the symbols, costumes, collages, graphic works and performative actions of the group as a paratext able to direct to audience towards a specific reading of the songs, a framing. Two elements compound the frame, according to Lotman: the beginning and the end of a text (215). Like the periphery at the limit of a given text or semiotic system, it is characterised by a constant process of semiosis or exchange with the "Other", it is a porous threshold. In *The Friction of the Frame: Derrida's 'Parergon in Literature*, Simone Heller-Andrist notes: "not only do paratexts form the threshold between the reader's and the fiction's reality, but they also constitute the textual portal through which we access a piece of fiction. Thus, they can not only ease our access, but also manipulate and channel our reading" (23).

The most traditional form of paratext in the sonic fiction of CCCP can be traced in the collages created in the first years. In this more pronouncedly punk phase, the group not only included xerox copies with their first album, *Ortodossia* (1984), but also in a separate *Catalogue* (1985) to distribute during concerts.

Structured like an abecedary in the fashion of a school writing arrowed guide, each character is surrounded by a handwritten description of its political and philosophic meanings associated to a keyword contributing to the band's imaginary. Each letter is followed by a related collage including lyrics and images, composed in a fashion that is heavily influenced by the revolutionary avant-gardes' aesthetics: perspectives and angles 'from below' as taught by Rodchenko (Khan-Magomedov 233), constructivist compositions similar to the pioneering Latvian photographer and major Constructivist Gustav Klutsis, the works of Vladimir Maiakovsky and especially of Varvara Stepanova (1932). What is more, Stepanova's powerful 'montages' depicting Red Army soldiers marching on a red background, such as the collaborative work *Groznyi smekh for the Okna Rosta* [*Menacing Laughter: The ROSTA Windows*] with Maiakovsky (1932) (fig. 2) or *Red Army Men* (1930) (fig. 2), are indisputably brought to mind by the album cover image of *Ortodossia* (fig. 3).



Fig 1. Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Maiakovsky, *Menacing Laughter*, 1932

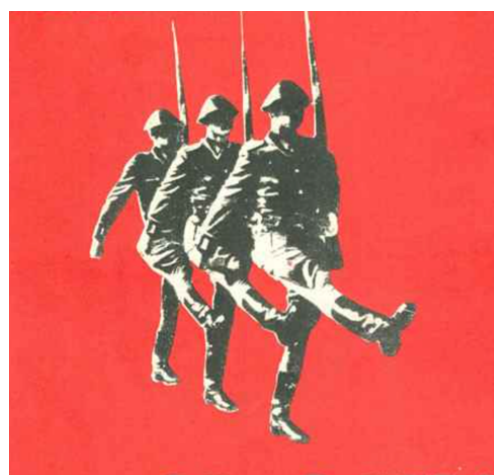


Fig. 3. CCCP Fedeli alla linea, *Ortodossia*, Attack Punk Record, 1984. Cover album detail.



Fig. 2. Varvara Stepanova, *Red Army Men*, 1930.

The *Catalogue* emerges as an artifact situated at the crossroads of a punk fanzine, a do-it-yourself publication, and a standalone artwork. Within its pages, paratextual elements such as collages of images, photographs, and cut-out textual elements are incorporated by serving not only as complementary additions to the song lyrics included in the book, but also engaging in a meaningful dialogue with them.

Observing, for example the letter O of Orthodoxy (fig. 4), a handwritten line wraps it both graphically and verbally, delineating its shape and its symbolic meaning: tridimensionality, depth, the part for the whole. Subsequently, the ensuing page (fig. 5) introduces the initial composition from *Affinità e Divergenze*'s inaugural studio album (1986), which shares the band's nomenclature and elucidates their stance ('faithful to the line/but there is no line'). Within the spatial confines of the page, the song lyrics amalgamate with a collage composition, pressing on the far-left against a backdrop of Soviet postmarks arranged as an ideological pillar, based on the foundation of a victory medal. The text is partly pierced by the tip of a sickle that traverses the page in a diagonal line reminiscent of perspectives commonly employed in constructivist compositions.

These diagonal lines were particularly evident in Rodchenko's photographs, capturing everyday individuals and workers from vertical perspectives.

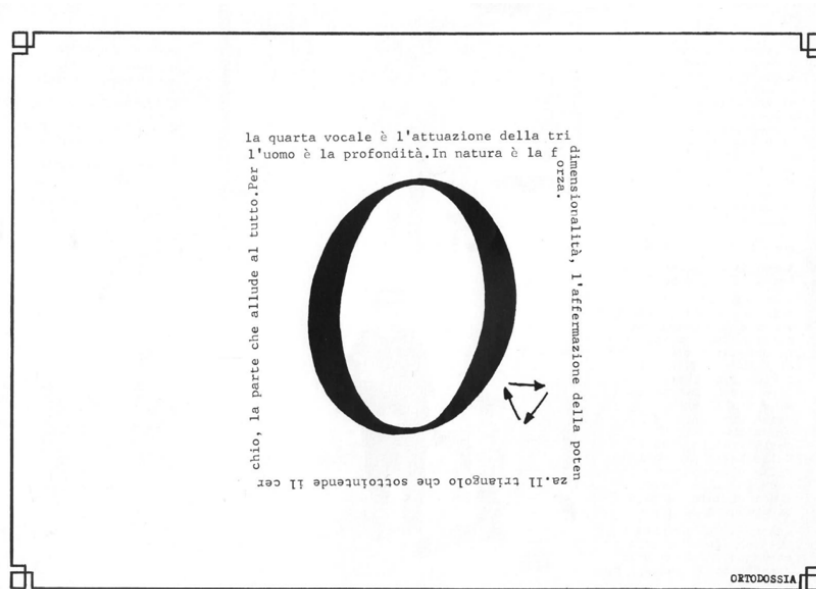


Fig. 4. CCCP Fedeli alla linea, *Catalogue*, 1985.



Fig. 5. CCCP Fedeli alla linea, *Catalogue*, 1985.

As a guideline, the paratextual introduction of the *Catalogue* argues against the limitation of descriptions, particularly of isolated letters, emphasizing the necessity of writing to refer individual elements to a context, a whole, thus urging readers to explore the catalogue through spatial relations, movement, and interactions to stimulate their imagination.

Once again, the concept of paratextuality is revealed as a porous threshold rather than a neat semantic delimitation, as in her book *The Friction of the Frame*, Heller-Andrist quotes J. Hillis Miller's definition of frame as a membrane blurring the distinction between inside and outside, thus allowing an indistinct mutual transition (24). After all, the slogan defining the group "fedeli alla linea" – faithful to the (Party) line – explicitly articulates that the loyalty to a line does not entail obstinately tracing an impassable border. Instead, it acknowledges its continual process of dissolution and reformation, influenced by the intricate interplay of contextual elements – specifically, the constellations shaping the atmosphere and fiction of philo-Soviet sentiment – and the unique, individual imagination inherent to local and personal sensibilities. It is with such awareness and artistic strategy that CCCP, a group that unequivocally played a pivotal role in disseminating Soviet punk imagery to a broader Italian audience, diffuses the sonic fiction of an experience they had not encountered first-hand yet.

Melpignano, a 2000-people town in the then Christian democratic region of Apulia, had been an anomalously communist enclave since 1980 with mayor Antonio Avantaggiato. In June 1988, committed to promote southern Italian music, Sergio Blasi – and the local association Arcinova – coordinated by Antonio Princigalli – obtained Avantaggiato's support to organize a concert to showcase the regional rock scene. In that year, with the title *Compagno Rock*, the publishing house Vallardi released the Italian edition of Troitsky's *Back to USSR*, translated by M. Bughdadi. Inspired by this publication, the communist administration decided to invite to the festival Soviet musicians for a cultural exchange the next year. The proposal, presented to the Soviet embassy in Rome, didn't wait long an answer: "President Michail Sergeevich Gorbachev has seen your project: it is very interesting, and he intends to finance it" (Bisceglia), reads the official response note. The festival, named *Le idi di Marzo* [*The Ides of March*] to honor Gorbachev's election as party general secretary, took place on July 23-24, 1988. Organized under the patronage of the Italy-USSR Association, Arcinova, the Soviet Embassy, and Moscow's cultural association Sputnik, the lineup featured local bands Mista & Missis (Lecce), Circo Braille (Bari) and Downtowners (Rome) alongside Leningrad groups Televizor, Igry, and Sekret, Moscow's New Collection, Tartu's Justament, and Yugoslavian Demolition Group. Additionally, two emerging progressive Italian rock groups were invited, Litfiba and, unsurprisingly, CCCP Fedeli alla Linea.

Under the impulse of Bughdadi's translation, Melpignano administration and Arcinova representative organised, *de facto*, the very first Soviet rock festival in Italy and one of the first in Europe. Yet another important figure can be annumerated amongst the socio-cultural agents making the Italian reception of Soviet rock possible. Alba Solaro, contributing journalist for *Rock-erilla magazine* (1984-1992) and staff journalist at the leftist newspaper *l'Unità* (1985-2000) was amongst the very few announcing the festival on national scale in *l'Unità* (17 July 1988), profusely reporting to the Italian readership the events that would have followed with a sober and attentive pen.

Only post-factum the Italian press would report about the festival with mixed feelings. On July 26, newspaper *La Repubblica* titles the review article “Sconcerto Rock”, characterizing the event as truly disconcerting with a pun on ‘gig’ and ‘appalling’. While acknowledging Melpignano’s “willingness to burn on time more accredited national organizations [...] to this first close encounter with the great seething rock planet that presses between the rifts opened by the new socialist transparency” (Castaldo), the musicians chosen by the Russian embassy are perceived as Western caricatures or entirely incomprehensible. However, the arrival of Igry and Televizor, ensembles representing the emerging Leningrad music underground, is seen as a breath of fresh air, defined, unclearly on what basis, as “a radical and above all truly Soviet context, without philo-Western attitudes”. The majority of the audience is drawn to Litfiba, with some expressing interest in CCCP.

The following day, Solaro in *l’Unità* defines the concert as “paleorock”, especially referring to the performance of beat-pop band Sekret whose style, incarnating (with what Solaro benevolently interprets as irony) the spirit of Beatles and Chuck Berry, strengthens the perception of Russian rock as a palaeographic one (“Paleorock made in USSR”). Recognising that, expectedly, the bands seen in Melpignano cannot be representative of the entire Soviet rock production, and that old, more easily officialised rock examples exists also in the West, Solaro refers to the transgressive rock tradition since the ‘50s as counterbalance, in light that the festival aimed to present a broad spectrum from official to underground formations. Despite the balanced remarks of Solaro, the artists’ selection was, unsurprisingly, heavily mediated by institutional necessities.

Lauded are the performances of Igry and Televizor, who more distinctly embody aesthetics reminiscent of post-punk, new wave, industrial.¹ Through the review, the quest for “deviant” and “transgressive” groups like Aquarium and others described by Troitsky is quite transparent, echoing *La Repubblica*’s expectations for “truly Soviet” groups, radical and not philo-Western. Nevertheless, Solaro notes that the festival’s significance lies primarily in the Soviet musicians’ presence itself rather than in the specific musical styles: “no matter; the first close contact with rock made in the USSR has taken place and promises to continue” (“Paleorock made in USSR”), she affirms while describing the surreal arrival of Igry at the town’s patronal festival, exchanging merchandise and the few records imported with the locals.

The festival was followed by *Back in USSR* on 4-11 September in Rome at the EUR Tourism Park. Organised by the Alcatraz Free University and the Rome Culture Department, the event features a more curated selection by journalist and writer Artemy Troitsky in person, including Igry, Televizor, Zhanna Aguzarova’s Bravo, Antis and Zvuki Mu. It provides an insight of Soviet young culture with movies, photo exhibitions, and even four fashion designers.

¹ Amongst the influences noted are Einstürzende Neubaten, Smitns, Bauhaus, and the Jesus and Mary Chain.

On 14 September Alba Solaro reviews the event. “Arrivederci, compagno rock,” heaping praise to Igry and Televizor, interviews Troitsky, who contrasts the social role of Soviet rock, taken seriously and sometimes apprehensively by authorities, to the entertainment in the West. Rather than a commercialized curiosity, rock should be shown as a vital component of Soviet culture, through sounds, lyrics, messages, and values. The press seems to be more aware of the risks of bringing it out of context, subjecting it to the western gaze with superficiality. As Troitsky notes, though, without understanding the lyrics and the cultural context, it is not easy for the western audience to distinguish between emulation of western tropes and local articulations. Not even when Italian band CCCP uses quite a specular strategy in Italy.

The 1989 edition of the Roman festival sees bands like Avia and Kino. Years later, Kino members recalled the concert in Italy as disorganized and poorly attended by an audience seemingly more interested in simply witnessing “Russians playing musical instruments” rather than a music performance per se (Kalgin 234). Despite Victor Tsoi’s unempathetic annoyance at playing near a camp of displaced compatriots,² reflecting his transition from underground to superstar status, the Italian audience pays little attention to him and applauds Avia’s opening act instead. Newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* dedicates them the title “Majakovsky [sic] sound,” while *l’Unità*, briefly mentioning Kino as ‘romantic rock,’ publishes “Avia: La protesta è una festa” (Solaro, “Avia”). Despite their attempts to evade labellings as ‘protest music,’ Solaro traces in their performance satire to Soviet bureaucratic rituals imbued with ‘20s avantgarde aesthetic.

The event has a certain resonance also in the USSR, as demonstrated by the reports on the Leningrad *samizdat* journal *RIO*, issue 37 (1989), which even quoted fragments of reviews from Italian newspapers such as *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *l’Unità* and the *Il Gazzettino*. However, in an interview, Avia described the Italian public as quite unresponsive: “They ‘consume’ music there, so they just [...] sit quietly the entire concert, at the end they applaud, or simply leave [...]. Local pop musicians say that [...] if there is any rock music, it is mainly in the north - Milan, Turin. [...] The attitude towards music is completely different there” (Burlaka and Gusev 26).

In Spring 1989, after the European tour, Viktor Tsoi openly addresses the problem of the western exoticizing gaze to *Young Leninists* magazine:

Now in the West there is a very strong fashion for Russia [...]. But the attitude to all this is very unserious, like to matryoshkas: look, the Russians play guitars, almost like we do. [...] The last thing I wanted

² Gurianov’s words from the interview with Kalgin in the same publication: “The concert in Rome. A well-known story. Tsoi was nicknamed ‘stormbringer.’ There was a camp for displaced persons nearby. It was a temporary transit point in Rome: people were migrating from the Soviet Union to Israel via Rome. And after playing at large venues and stadiums, Victor didn’t want to play in front of a bunch of pitiful emigrants. He said, ‘I don’t want to, this isn’t right...’ And then – Providence! A terrible wind blew, the sky was covered with black clouds, and the entire stage, along with the equipment, was simply blown to hell...Everything flew into the sky – the drums, the speakers... Do you know what a Mediterranean storm is like? Everything was swept away, blown away by the wind...It was fantastic, simply miraculous. Everything – there would be no concert! But we still had to play, on the second and third days... But there was no fatalism in it. We just didn’t want to play in front of a handful of emigrants...” (Kalgin 234-35.) Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine.

was to look like such a *matrioshka*. [...] I decided to go and see how much communication could be established. I can't say that it was very successful, because they rather expected some Russian exoticism from us, and saw instead proper rock music. (Tsoi 1989)

As *The Ides of March* was originally thought as cultural exchange, the Italian bands CCCP, Litfiba, Modena Rats and Mista & Missis landed in the Soviet Union on March 22, 1989. Before them, very few Italian rock groups had done so, and all in the previous few months: Avion Travel, Kim Squad, and Selena Moor. The Russian tour lasted a week split between Moscow and Leningrad, during the election days under Easter. Alba Solaro follows the Italian groups to the USSR, reporting about a rock scene that, relieved from the Brezhnevian repressions, has become, more than the West, an interpreter of societal moods, “as an autonomous, strong, free language; it marks the rhythm of transformation, it is really, now more than ever, a “rhythm of our age” (Solaro, “Cronache da un altro mondo”).

The concert took place on March 24 at the arena of the TsSKA [Tsentral'nyi Sportivnyi Klub Armii], a military multifunctional sports hall in the northwest of Moscow. The atmosphere was completely different from that of Melpignano, and not only for the proverbial grandness of the metropolis' venues. Moscow had seen several big rock bands from Europe and the USA in the past, and the concert didn't attract a big audience, due to a lack of publicity of the event and the prohibitive 10-rubles price of the entrance ticket. Among the few young people in the public, most of the seats are occupied by soldiers of the Red Army sent to the concert. The pressing control of the centre of Soviet empire was palpable: “Russians [...] hold cultural life in high regard. But culture also has to deal with those who govern it” (Solaro, “Cronache da un altro mondo”).

In this highly official setting, the Italian bands observe a surreal and pompous introduction by a tailcoated announcer, who at the end of the concert would proceed to auction the promotional material brought by the Italian bands, together with Greenpeace's *Breakthrough*. “This is the price paid for ending up in the hands of a local organizer with few scruples and little desire to invest in the fine hopes of Italian rock; in fact, Kim Squad and Avion Travel had already found it on their way, with more or less similar stories” writes Solaro. We learn from the story of a Russian band at the concert, Galaktika, that the event was a charity initiative for the restoration fund of Old Moscow (Aleksiev et al.), although the Italians were not very convinced. Members of Rats band reported that both opening bands, Sekret and Galaktika, described as the worst example of old glam rock, performed on lip-sync in front of the cameras with an inexplicable *nonchalance*.

Introduced not without difficulty by the presenter, CCCP played one of their most intense performances, animated by Fatur's almost pornographic energy and Annarella's two-meter-tall costume – a matryoshka gradually stripped away to reveal her floral pinafore and yellow wig.³

³ Annarella's performance was repeated the next morning on the steps of St. Basil's on Red Square, under the eyes of the guards and a curious public (Solaro, “Cronache da un altro mondo”)

The band did not avoid to play its most irreverent songs for the Soviet audience, such as *Radio Kabul*, a song recalling the Soviet-Afghan war; *Huligani Dangereux*, dedicated to the young countercultures in Eastern Europe, and finally *A Ja Ljublj SSSR* [And I love the USSR], a proto-punk reinterpretation of Alexandrov's State Anthem of the Soviet Union played with an electric guitar at increased distortion. Rooted in Reggio-Emilian local culture and layered with diverse characters and imageries, most of their irony and references likely proved unintelligible to the muscovite audience, beyond the band's aesthetic hyper-identification with the Eastern Bloc. Yet the response to the first riffs struck a unanimous reaction and the Emilian punks saw the Red Army soldiers and officials in the first row standing up with a hand upon their heart (Solaro, "Cronache da un altro mondo"). This intense moment not only constitutes an admittedly glorious coronation of the project's poetic, but also the substantiation of an ideal world – and thus its dissolution or metamorphosis.

While the response of the public may have been a conditioned reflex typical of a militaristic imprint – as expected in such highly controlled and institutionalized events – it revealed a convergence of forms and signals able to connect impulses and reactions across the stage, while simultaneously performing its conflation of significations, mutual projections and expectations into one another. While wrapped in irony and critique, CCCP Fedeli alla Linea's sincere homages were welcomed, yet without a recognition of their *stēb* from Reggio Emilia let alone of any hyper-identificative element in the performance. Mirroring performativities, when generated from different perspectives – such as artistic imagination or Pavlovian conditioning – create likely misaligned reflections. Nonetheless, CCCP at last met their own imaginary East and in its highest ceremonial form, not only blurring the line between fiction and reality, but also proving that misalignment can take different forms and can bring asymmetrical epiphanies.

The highly controlled environment of Moscow changes drastically in Leningrad, that is seen by the Italians as a liberation (*Kissing Gorbaciov*).⁴ The musical event is divided between legendary Rock Club and the House of Cultures on the following day, when CCCP band open the concert. The venue is crowded with rockers and very young punks. When the band appears on stage, a voice yells *Emilia Paranoica*, the title of one of their most famous songs: it was the president of the Urals' Rock Club, who heard the song in Melpignano. The first seeds of exchange had been planted.

Despite the Italians' enthusiasm for the vibrancy of Leningrad underground music scene, and the proximity with groups like Kino, Pop-Mekhanika and others, they encountered challenges in establishing meaningful interactions with local artists and residents. The band Rats reported

⁴ *Kissing Gorbaciov* is a documentary by Andrea Paco Mariani and Luigi D'Alife that traces the story of CCCP's tour in the Soviet Union through unpublished archival material and testimonies from those directly involved. I want to thank Massimo Zamboni for bringing this documentary to my attention during my article's writing process in 2022 and for connecting me with the filmmakers, who graciously allowed me to view the film prior to its release.

that the intentional assignment of an additional interpreter, named Svetlana, alongside their designated one, purposefully maintained a considerable distance from direct interactions. Moreover, the placement of their hotel located away the city centre further impeded opportunities for possible engagements.

Interviewed by Daniela Amenta soon after, CCCP Fedeli alla Linea confirmed that their visit to Russia partially validated their wager of the imaginary, even in the confirmation of how their performances mirrored ‘Soviet cabarets’ and noticing how ‘serious’ Emilians understand Mayakovsky and “the desire, the beauty, the infamy and even the terror of the Soviet people’s drive to change the world” (“Interview with CCCP fedeli alla linea”).

In November of the same year, as the Berlin Wall falls, CCCP band is recording its final album, *Epica Etica Etnica Pathos* (1990) in collaboration with Gianni Maroccolo of *Litfiba*, whom they befriended during the tour in the USSR. In the album’s press release, the group reflected on the reunification of Germany, seeing it as the conclusion of an era and the artistic journey of CCCP while “now the transparency that clashes with the pond colour of the waters and yet invites us; we fear for the Latvian swimmers, the Armenians, the Azeri swimmers and the Don boatmen, but these days fate seems to be in the hands of those who want it, and on shaky platforms, those who want to decide decide decide. And so we have decided”.

In later interviews, Ferretti remarked that the CCCP project symbolically reached its conclusion in Moscow, during the Red Army soldiers’ reaction to their cover of the Anthem, unaffected by the possibility that it was all a parody. “We felt that Russia was like home [...]. It was a world in shambles - beautiful but in shambles [...] and for us that was the end, the conclusion” (*Kissing Gorbaciov*).

This particular story of contact between Italian and Soviet rock doesn’t unfold through open dialogue, clarity, or immediate mutual understanding. Rather, it stems from the allure of an enigmatic world, fulfilled in a mirroring of poetic similitudes drawn mainly from imaginative reconstructions based on official and limited information, institutional mediations and *lakirovki* [varnishing], all traversing a wall in the process of dissolution. It could be argued, along the metaphor of a CCCP slogan “Fedeli alla linea/La linea non c’è [Faithful to the line/but there is no line]” but also the Lotmanian definition of limit, that it reflects the story of how the line, the frame of Italo- (and Western-) Soviet relations moves in history.

Most foreseeably, when the actors of the international network had set up a real contact, the encounter is strongly mediated by a still State-driven cultural policy decision on the Soviet side, limiting a genuine exchange between artist yet revealing a glimpse of the controlled context soviet rockers had been living in – and how the central power of the capital reflects it portentously.

From the first articles, it’s notable the inability of the Italian audience not only to understand that Western tendencies in Soviet rock are, starting from the *stiliagi* and their *roentg-*

enizdats with American rock-n-roll, part of the underground, but also to recognise Eastern European music culture as European. A certain exoticization emerges in the Italian initial reception, expecting the Soviet counterpart to be more primitive ('paleolithic') and unaware of the Western trends – and somehow extraneous to European cultures – than they really were and, above all, radically engaged against the State, ignoring how in late soviet times the strategy had long been that of closed circles or *tusovki* retaliating their space of freedom rather than openly protesting.

The clearest understanding that emerges after the very first encounter with soviet rock is the perception of a strong societal power that is tight to values rather than specific aesthetic forms, as generally expected by the Western audience. The contribution of Troitsky in informing the Italian audience is not only in the activity as writer of the book *Compagno rock*, translated by an untraceable M. Bughdadi. Troitsky actively interacted with Italy in curating personally events able to contextualise the soviet musical panorama, and collaborating with media and magazine interviews to explain what the Italian ear cannot hear easily. Journalist Alba Solaro, the first to document regularly this event since its inception, seems to listen to understand and diffuse such concepts in *l'Unità* and *Rockerilla* even before the travel to Russia.

On the front of the imaginary, CCCP band justify its philo-soviet aesthetic from the desire to restore some balance in an increasingly Americanised Europe, being aware of becoming a province of its empire and, regarding the Soviet Union, as another empire. And acting as such, by reflecting regional references with forgotten parts of European cultures such as the eastern one, Asian Republics, even the Muslim ones. This hybridised form as a form of resistance of a political and cultural system that is dissolving, giving space only to the American one, is the principal reason for the creation of a sonic fiction able to break through the inescapable cultural homologation through sonic experiences of possible different worlds and imageries. Thus, the philosovietism in the art of this group is not a form of cultural mediation based on concrete artefacts or ideologies from the USSR, but on atmospheres and affects able to evoke alternatives the audience has the faculty of integrating and interpreting in their own situated way.

In this sense, the Italian reception of Soviet counterculture in the rock scene starts from the sonic fiction of an Emilian band – the CCCP – that, even before a concrete contact with Soviet rock culture, created an imagery that although openly local, shaped the Italian expectations and thus reception of Soviet rock, operating through a cultural mediation that operates despite and on the absence of an actual interlocutor and still is able to preserve some aspects of the nuanced and liminal language of Soviet non-officiality and to consciously translate in its own “imaginary East” or *zagranitsa*.

An intriguing facet arising from the acknowledgment of Italy's provinciality in the Cold War context is the foreshadowing of decolonial reclaims. As early as 1984, CCCP band clarified – as mentioned also to Tondelli – that their affinity was not pro-Russian, but extended to a fondness

for the cultures of Asian and Muslim Republics. Upon the dissolution of the CCCP band, Ferretti and Zamboni founded the band Consorzio Suonatori Indipendenti, aka CSI, an acronym reminiscent of the Italian term for the Commonwealth of Independent States. This perspective anticipates the imagery of the current decolonial shift in the aftermath of Russia's conflict with Ukraine.

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