

# Erasing Language: An Analysis on Vincenzo Agnetti's *Axioms*

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**Abstract** The present dissertation aims to highlight the process of language erasure that Vincenzo Agnetti employs in his artistic production, with a specific focus on the aesthetic features and the 'narrations' present in the *Axioms* series, related to absence and void. Throughout the study of these works, with reference to the poetic vision of the artist – for example, the concept of 'forgotten by heart' – it will be shown how the notion of void traverses the *Axioms*: meditations on memory, temporality and space are fundamental for a broader reflection on absence related to experience, in an existential and political sense.

**Keywords** Axioms. Language. Memory. Erasure. Vincenzo Agnetti.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Process of 'Zeroing': Memory, Erasure and Void in Agnetti's Artistic Production. – 3 On Technical Aspects and Critique of Language in *Axioms*. – 4 A Path Through 'Narrations': From Time to Absence. – 5 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

Commenting on *Thesis*, written by Vincenzo Agnetti (1926-1981) and published with Giampaolo Prearo in 1972, Pierre Restany affirms that, for the author, "the zero is the Sanhedrin of [...] inward-looking vision" (1973, 46). The systematic reflection on the value of zero, in terms of "dialectic neutralization of opposites" (46), is central to Agnetti's artistic production, starting from the first activities carried out in the Fifties, to the effective creative period that begins in 1967,

conventionally, with *Principia*, exhibition that takes place in Palazzo de' Diamanti in Ferrara.

In the prolific cultural Milanese scene of the Fifties, after few years spent exploring the informal painting and the theatrical practice, the young Agnetti begins to write some art-critical texts for Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani. One of these, *I°: Non commettere atti impuri*, published in 1959 in the newly launched magazine *Azimuth*, is an important statement that contains the poetic vision – in power – of the artist. By saying “il superamento fa paura a qualsiasi principio” (Agnetti 1959), Agnetti expresses his intention to overcome the informal mannerism, in order to take a new path in art. But it takes time to pursue this achievement: between 1962 and 1967, Agnetti decides to move to Argentina in order to work in the field of electronic automation, leaving the saturated and obsolete Milanese cultural salons<sup>1</sup> (Agnetti 2008, 38). To reach ‘real freedom’, Agnetti refuses any artistic practice – which implies his former activities –. This period, also known as ‘no-art’ is recorded only by the intellectualisation of the experience and the stream of ideas collected in several notebooks: almost two thousand pages, containing meditations and projects, elaborated and never re-read, are called by himself *Absence* (38). This title is the first reference to the ‘forgotten by heart’, the main concept present in the subsequent artistic production. By this expression, Agnetti reflects on the *ars oblivionalis*, the ability to leave behind the lived time in order to metabolize it and go further: the existence becomes a trace of countless past moments.

Projected before his departure from Italy in 1962, Agnetti begins writing *Obsoleto*, published in 1967: born as a story about love and hatred between a man and a woman, the writing becomes an attempt to demolish the logical mechanism of language and an example of admixture between image and text (Vettese 2008, 182); moreover, it's noteworthy that meditation on language is already a fundamental component in his earlier works.

These first attempts reflect the *leitmotif* of the subsequent production: by 1967, returning from his journeys, Agnetti begins to work on language and its zeroing, with a specific focus on political and cultural components, related to space, territory and power. In one of the main series produced between 1968 and 1977, that of the *Axioms*, this kind of meditation is prominent, not only in its formal aspects but also in its contents.

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<sup>1</sup> His interest in technology and its influence on society was not unknown at that time. In fact, in 1958, he wrote three articles for the first issues of the new specialized magazine *L'Italia Industriale*, in which he navigated between the technical aspects and the philosophical implications of technology.

Giving first an overview on the process of 'zeroing' in selected works realized between 1967 and 1981, this essay will show how, in the series of the *Axioms*, Agnetti reflects on the erasure of the language until it results in void as a final act of freedom in art, with several references that traverse his philosophical apparatus.

## 2 The Process of 'Zeroing': Memory, Erasure and Void in Agnetti's Artistic Production

After his debut in the art world in 1967, the first attempts related to language and its erasure could be detected in the connection with other fields of Agnetti's research. In October 1969, Agnetti exposes at Galleria Cenobio-Visualità in Milan, an art space directed by Rina Majoli and Cesare Nova, whose aim concerns innovative solutions in art. In this context, Agnetti presents *La macchina drogata* (1968), a Divisumma 14 Olivetti calculator, modified in its components: numbers are replaced by letters of the Latin alphabet. The exhibition is conceived as a path through the machine's products – displayed on emulsified canvas and modified with watercolors and tempera – and the 'static theatre',<sup>2</sup> introduced by three black panels outlining the operation. At the end of this hallway, a narrow passage leads the public into the room in which the machine is contained (Agnetti 2021, 48). Visitors are encouraged to interact with the manipulated technology: the replacement of numbers with letters causes casual connections between typographic characters, producing "oggetti dotati di una propria autonomia estetica" (Sylos Calò 2016, 256). While the interest in new technologies is highlighted by the investigation of the status of the machine, which shifts from *medium* to *agens*, it is also noticeable how words and their meanings are at the center of this research. Reflecting on the uncertainty of the combinations, the semantic aspects are completely dissolved and the letters become merely aesthetic signs.

Derived from *La macchina drogata* is *Corfine* (1968), a canvas with a wooden frame on which traces of pantographed letters are scattered as a remembrance of the original work. As Agnetti affirms:

Il circondario altera il circondato: giusto quindi escludere il circondario dal quadro; giusto che il circondario diventi l'opera

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<sup>2</sup> The static theatre is, for Agnetti, "spettacolo senza movimento, senza personaggi e senza testo [...] Le motivazioni dell'opera (oggetto o non oggetto), l'ubicazione e la violenza per l'osservatore, perché cerchi qualcosa, saranno il testo. Il teatro invece si verificherà nella mente dell'osservatore" (quoted in Castelli 1974, 4-6). Agnetti derives this inclination to *phonè* – that we can find in performative actions – from his experience as actor at Piccolo Teatro (Corà 2017, 48).

stessa. Questa volta è la pittura che è quasi dimenticata a memoria. Alcune parole traspaiono ai margini della tela rimasta. In tal modo la cornice si valorizza come confine e il vuoto interno diventa paradossalmente cornice. (Agnetti 1979, 28)

Thus, the traditional hierarchised structure of canvas and frame is overturned; the latter becomes a surrounding and the text of the inner part is completely dissolved, reducing itself to a void space. In this sense, dialectically, the frame is not the limit of the work but becomes the work itself.

In 1970, Agnetti has the opportunity to join *Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70*, collective exhibition hosted at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome and curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. Moving through points of contact and differences between artists, new tendencies in art are presented in an institutional space: the main aim is to propose solutions to the “crisi dell'informazione attiva” (Sergio 2010, 28) in the contemporary art dissemination.

In this context, Agnetti carries out an operation of static theatre with *Apocalisse* (1969), product of *La macchina drogata*, a perspex book with seven red varnish seals. Located on a sand dune, in a gloomy environment, the book is accompanied by the sentence on the wall: “Quando l'agnello ruppe | il primo dei sette sigilli | uno dei quattro viventi disse | con voce di tuono: vieni” (Bignotti, Corà 2021, 50). The reference is the biblical *Apocalypse*, in which the mystery is mediated through scripture. But in this case, plates reporting casual texts of the machine are rendered illegible due to the overlapping: foregrounding the negation of sense, the mystery of the existence is conveyed by an obscure language, understandable only through intuition (Re 2021, 68).

*Libro dimenticato a memoria* (1969), exhibited on the same occasion, continues the discourse begun with *Corfine*. In the note on work, Agnetti affirms that:

Il libro si presenta svuotato, fustellato al centro. Praticamente le pagine hanno perso lo spazio che di solito è occupato dalle parole [...] La cultura è l'apprendimento del dimenticare. (Agnetti 1979, 42)

A book without content, framed only by white borders, while the central part is a black void: absence is symptomatic of forgetfulness, a silent space in which words are completely eliminated, and thus the images. Agnetti shows how knowledge is not measurable and so is the culture and its origins: it's the negative of consciousness, a thought that remains as an absent presence and shapes every aspect of individual reality (Tedeschi 2019, 26-8).

The negative of reality is also investigated in *Vobulazione e Bieloquenza Neg* (1970), a collaborative work created with Gianni Colombo, presented at *Telemuseo* in 1970, exhibition promoted by Tommaso Trini and organised by *Domus* in Palazzo dell'Arte in Milan. Both artists operate with electronic instruments, to meditate on virtual images and sound. Colombo uses a vobulator to create and manipulate shapes, exploiting the frequencies of the machine; Agnetti, after creating *Neg*, records the 'negative' parts of a monologue, or rather, the silence produced by pauses. The visual support, created by Colombo, is accompanied by two different moments of the sound experiment: the first part is characterized by the oxymoronic sound of silence, while the real discourse follows (Comi 1970, 295-6). It's a research on the unpredictable, on information that couldn't be objectified; as Agnetti said "la figura geometrica [...] è il corposo nulla mentre le parole [...] sono il silenzio" (1972, 42).

Erasing the language also means annulling its sound: if *Neg* could be identified as a first proof of this research, another way to set the linguistic code to zero is to translate it into a universal alphabet. On this matter, the meditation on sound is pursued in *Pieces of sound* (1981), one of the tracks of *Revolutions per Minute (The Art Record)*, produced by Jeff Gordon for the exhibition-project promoted by the gallerist Ronald Feldman (Morgan 1982, 88). It's a rhythmic composition in which a vocal part – the artist plays a series of numbers with different tones – alternates with a primitive sound, composed through modified percussion instruments. The apparently illegible discourse is instead a proof of a new way to communicate, that eliminates the semantic ambiguity of the language, in order to achieve the universal comprehension through intonation.

The reflection on language is paralleled by the discourse on images and their connection with photography: in his last personal exhibition in 1981, in the art space of Bruna Soletti, Agnetti exposes *Photo-Graffie* (1979-81). Working on photographic papers, exposing them to light, Agnetti manipulates the process, leading to the blackening of the previously captured photos. Then, scratching on these surfaces, the artist interacts with the material and generates the final product: graphic signs of light emerge from the black. It could be read as a final act of zeroing, in which the artist regains control of the medium through its nullifying, because negating and forgetting are necessary to restore "la parte più preziosa e necessaria" (Re 2017, 90).

### 3 On Technical Aspects and Critique of Language in *Axioms*

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, reflection on language informs Agnetti's production before his return to Italy in 1967: *Axioms*, series realised between 1968 and 1977, constitute a direct derivation from this research. Agnetti works on black bakelite, engraving the surface with axiomatic propositions, diagrams and geometric entities: resulting grooves are treated with white tempera or nitro. The opaque material seems to translate the asepticity of the plate into the black mental space, while engraved postulates refer to thoughts or intuitions emerged in the consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

It's noticeable that Agnetti uses 'neutral panels', as most of conceptual artists did,<sup>4</sup> but, overcoming the aged and compromising notion of canvas, makes them 'zeroed surfaces', alignable, as stated by Barilli, "all'idea di una condizione anestetica, cioè di assenza di ogni invito sensoriale" (1973, 13). Furthermore, as noted by Mario Perazzi, in an interview from 1972, these formal components cause a certain aesthetic sense, against the avoidance of materiality typical of conceptual works; nonetheless, for Agnetti, it doesn't result from seeking beauty, but from strictness in execution (Perazzi 1972, 12).

In the series, concepts are conveyed through language: the title recalls a formal logical strictness, but the process to which Agnetti submits the linguistic code is oriented to reveal fallacy of its mechanism. In a note referring to the series, Agnetti affirms that:

Assioma è il titolo di queste opere anche se solo raramente si tratta di proposizioni assiomatiche. Con diagrammi e frasi queste opere esprimono tautologie e contraddizioni. Gli 'Assiomi' rimangono la controprova di quanto enunciato in altre mie opere precedenti impostate sulla relatività del linguaggio scritto. (Agnetti 1979, 30)

Interest in the subject, related to the structures intrinsic to reality, confers a significant difference between Agnetti and other conceptual

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**3** In a letter to Françoise Lambert, Agnetti shows the origins of these works. The artist explains that: "queste opere devono essere perfette perché rappresentano la matrice contenutistica di una analisi ridotta ai minimi termini" (Agnetti, *Definizione* 1971). After constructing a critical discourse on a theme, Agnetti synthesizes the concept with an axiom, creating a so-called 'cliché'.

**4** An example of this tendency, with some formal points of contacts with *Axioms*, can be found in the earlier production of Bernar Venet. Between 1966 and 1976, the French artist works on "astrophysics, linguistics, the emerging information sciences, stock exchange prices and meteorological data" turning them into "objective signs, pictorial patterns, and photographic enlargements" (Guenin 2019, 7). As specified by Catherine Millet, Venet's objective, adopting monosemic codes, is to escape "any interpretation that is symbolic, metaphorical, subjective" (Millet 2019, 43).

artists who use language as their main instrument of research. If the subject, for many of them, is 'elided' from language – since statements are intended as monadic elements – for the Italian artist it is consubstantial to our communication code (Verzotti 2017, 96).

For Agnetti, investigating language means exploring the 'surrounding' and its fields, going beyond limited disciplines: the main focus is on "strutture che, costruendo un certo linguaggio e veicolandolo, con ciò fondano e legittimano un potere" (96).

This point reconnects with McLuhan's contributions to theory of media and their influences on societies. Starting from *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) to *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), McLuhan demonstrates how media become an integral part of human senses, modifying perception and thought structures; as the term 'massage' suggests, mainstream media give apparent pleasure, but they actually:

are so pervasive in [...] personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences, they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. (McLuhan 1967, 26)

In Foucaultian terms, direct product of social and cultural environments, subject is 'subjected' by the authority<sup>5</sup> (Foucault 1976, 81). As Marcuse states in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964):

As the substance of the various regimes no longer appears in alternative modes of life, it comes to rest in alternative techniques of manipulation and control. Language not only reflects these controls but becomes itself an instrument of control even where it does not transmit orders but information; where it demands, not obedience but choice, not submission but freedom. (2002, 106)

In this perspective, language erasure assumes a political undertone, compromising processes of knowledge and perceptions of reality. Going back to *Axioms*, overturned meanings and apparent nonsense, through paradoxes, tautologies and contradictions, negate their legibility. It's "un impegno etico e poetico" (Re 2017, 90), in order to reset everything to zero and to start from zero.

Introducing a process of 'reification' of ideas, Agnetti doesn't operate only a metalinguistic critique, but uses concepts as a vehicle

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**5** On this matter, *Autotelefonata* (1972) could be mentioned: a sequence of photos shows the subject – Agnetti himself – that takes two telephone handsets, not communicating with anyone; in the last frame the two objects are juxtaposed: individual is subjected while information exists without them.

for themes from his theoretical apparatus, creating different kinds of 'narrations'.

#### 4 A Path Through 'Narrations': From Time to Absence

Narrations are selected fields of Agnetti's research, from the writings to the artworks, thematic cores – not strictly categorical – that provide different levels of reading, giving a broader vision of the artist's *weltanschauung*.

The first written production is used as a source; in fact, as Agnetti states:

I primi lavori partono da tentativi di trovare definizioni molto precise dalla geometria. Le frasi sono tutte mie: ricavate da precedenti scritti [...] altre inventate. (quoted in Boragina 2024, 154)

To the diachronic and linear time, typical of economic production, Agnetti opposes the Bergsonian temporality, linked to the imaginary and the subconscious. This antithetical relation is explored in *Axioms*: the former as a deposition of the effects of time on objects, the latter as a subjective interpretation of events through memory.

Diachronic time is strictly linked to work-instants axioms. *Dati due istanti-lavoro vi sarà sempre una durata-lavoro contenente gli istanti dati* / *Given two work-instants there will always be a work-duration containing these given instants* (1972) shows, in the structure, signs of the time through two broken corners, a 'proof' of the sentence engraved on the plate. Work, from a general concept, becomes an action grounded in time, capable of affecting reality. On this matter, Barilli affirms that this operation is a

Riflessione bergsoniana che mette di fronte, anzi in scala gerarchica il tempo puro e quello pratico o degli eventi circoscritti [...] Agnetti ha preferito esemplificare 'esteticamente' i due interventi sbrecciando due angoli della superficie di bachelite, dando loro cioè una concretezza oggettiva imperdonabile agli occhi di ogni concettuale di stretta osservanza. (Barilli 1973, 13)

While time and space are analyzed in their symbiotic relationship, memory is explored as a possibility to recall events from mental space and to forget, through an exercise of assimilation and erasure. From the last point descends the concept of 'forgotten by heart', reported in some *Axioms* such as *Lavoro - Agnetti quasi dimenticato a memoria* (1972), in which little points of light underline the incomplete process of obsolescence, evident by traces still visible to eye.



From a 1968 axiom, *Memoria come primo punto nel nulla*, the black table is foregrounded as a manifest metaphorical form of mental space: the void enfolds the surface except for a white point in the center, a presence of consciousness in opposition to emptiness.

From 1974 until 1977, Agnetti worked on two groups of *Axioms*, *Sei villaggi differenti* and *Tre villaggi differenti*. On each surface, consonants and forgotten phonemes, without any meaning, are engraved: the same fate is destined to villages or societies from which they came and only dissolving traces attest the echo of their ancient languages. These communities are replaced by the standardised cities, conformed to alienating homologation (Verzotti 2018, 62).

At this point, it's clear how identity is something culturally determined: borders define territory and territorial areas create culture. Against this kind of limited environment, Agnetti proposes a

più ampio concetto di spazio, che si assume come trascendente, illimitato, che vale insomma come generalità rispetto a una particolarità [...] pronta ad accogliere (dialetticamente, certo) le istanze identitarie che ogni territorializzazione sembra destinata a porre. (56)

The violent aspect of this concept could be identified in *Misurare lo spazio è solo e solo un gesto di appropriazione territoriale* (1972), where the terms suggest the creation of physical or symbolic walls, while trapezoidal shapes in the upper part of the surface recall the divided space.

As can be seen in *La cultura persa nel tempo e dimenticata a memoria è la nostra eredità genetica* (1973), it's noteworthy how culture plays a major role in shaping identity, making it an essential part of genetic heritage. Moreover, culture and consequently language, taking suggestions from Marcuse, are instruments of established power; the system is

perennemente teso ad offrirci parole e oggetti dal significato duplice: uno vero ma omissso perché perturbante, ed uno falso da noi accettato perché indolore e capace di farci sentire del nostro tempo. (Bernardi, Corà 2015, 44)

In this way, the axiom *The system uses objects as vehicles and ideals as fuel* (1973) can be interpreted, in which Agnetti reports the idea of the 'reminder': objects are significant only relating to concepts they can convey, and these meanings are inevitably manipulated by power. They are historical products, comprehensible and understandable in a certain time; thus, *L'oggetto è una deposizione storica di conduzione utilitaristica e culturale* (1970) has on its surface a copy of *Obsoleto*:

made by a 'historical' individual, it indeed becomes the product of a spatial and temporal context.

Furthermore, it's important to highlight how, in *Axioms*, statements can be reconnected with other works: in *Il discorso si apre tra chiusura e chiusura* (1971), is present a direct reference to *Neg* and the research on the negative of sound. In this sense, theoretical practice itself becomes part of the statements. In *Quando le parole si elevano a valori di numeri i numeri valgono le parole* (1969), the black table features overturned letters at its apex and as in mathematical language, they have exponents. Words assume the role of numbers, while numbers become vehicles of concepts; thus, idioms lose meaning through their transformation in numerical signs, universally legible thanks to the tone.

The existential and mystical side intertwines, in *Axioms*, with the antinomic relationship between light (positive) and blackness (negative). Through *In principio era la negazione in attesa dello stupore* (1971),<sup>6</sup> Agnetti references the biblical verse while altering its meaning: in this case, it is necessary indeed to negate our known reality in order to attain the dimension of truth.

The final act of zeroing is evident in a group of *Axioms*, wherein words and numbers dissolve completely. On the opaque surfaces, only geometric traces and graphic signs remain, recalling the study conducted on *Photo-Graffie*. In *Le vecteur qui vient au devant de nous s'éloigne* (1972), bakelite is scratched and not engraved, for a more pictorial effect. But beyond barely visible flowers, the mathematical component is contained within the title: vector is the measure through which intensity and direction can be established. Vectors are legible through human schemes but

senza rinunciare a quel senso misterioso dello spazio, di traiettorie immerse nel nero come nel vuoto cosmico, di contro alla presenza bianca, chiara della luce in cui si muovono persone e oggetti del nostro orizzonte. (Meneguzzo 2017, 62)

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**6** This work is exposed at *Vincenzo Agnetti. Ridondanza: paesaggi e ritratti. Analisi: assiomi*, exhibition hosted - between February and March of 1971 - at Galleria Blu in Milan. It is centered on *Axioms* and *Felts*, constituting a path through the analytical and lyrical aspects of his first production.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has explored the notion of void in Agnetti's *Axioms*, analyzing them on different levels. Starting from a brief overview of some cases from Agnetti's production (1967-81), it has been shown how processes of language erasure and research into the negative aspects of reality are constantly embraced with different solutions, interweaving with Agnetti's other interests, such as technology and photography.

In the examined series, erasure occurs on multiple levels encompassing formal aspects, narrations and metalinguistic research. Agnetti carries out two processes: on the one hand, he exposes, through paradoxical and tautological statements, a synthesis of his thought, expressed in writings and other works yet; on the other hand, he attempts to reveal the fallacy of linguistic code – through the compromised sense of phrases – in order to achieve its 'zeroing'.

Exploring *Axioms* through their 'narrations' – from time and memory to culture, power and territory, culminating in the absolute absence – it is evident how philosophical and sociological thought, from McLuhan to Marcuse, becomes increasingly relevant for understanding the political significance of the erasure in Agnetti. 'Forgetting by heart' leads to a zero point, an original and cosmic void in which utopian freedom and authenticity, without any cultural constraints, exist, beyond time and space.

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