



The Province and Elsewhere. Paolo Conte's Songs as a Way to Conceptualize Space

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The province and elsewhere. Paolo Conte's songs as a way to conceptualize space

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ABSTRACT.— Paolo Conte is one of Italy's greatest contemporary singer-songwriters. His work is deeply rooted in the Po valley of the Post World War II. His poetics also use more exotic geographical references from South America to Zanzibar, as part of an allegorical displacement. This artistic strategy allows Conte to impart broader, even universal, impact to ordinary stories. His spatial conception revolves around two intertwined geographic archetypes: the province and elsewhere. The former is made of haze and boredom, whereas the latter is a promise of happiness and an escape into the exotic.

EXOTICISM, LANDSCAPE, PROVINCE,
SONGS, TERRITORY

RÉSUMÉ.— *Entre la province et l'ailleurs. Les chansons de Paolo Conte : une contribution à penser l'espace.*— L'œuvre de Paolo Conte, l'un des grands chanteurs-compositeurs italiens contemporains, est intimement liée à la plaine du Pô de l'après-guerre. Elle mobilise également des références géographiques plus exotiques, de l'Amérique du Sud à Zanzibar, selon une stratégie de déplacement allégorique qui permet au poète de donner aux histoires ordinaires une portée plus ample, sinon universelle. La pensée spatiale de Paolo Conte est structurée par deux archétypes géographiques intimement liés : la province et l'ailleurs. La première est caractérisée par la brume et l'ennui, la deuxième apparaît comme une promesse de bonheur et une échappée vers l'exotisme.

CHANSON, EXOTISME, PAYSAGE,
PROVINCE, TERRITOIRE

This work is founded on two theoretical assumptions. Firstly, the idea that the space between *fact* and *fiction* – to borrow the title of Fabio Londo's 1994 work – can experience fruitful interactions, interactions which give rise to spaces where geographical objectivity and human subjectivity are superposed. Literary texts are thus precious sources, for example, for “understanding a landscape... both in terms of behavior, sensations, and ideas of feelings, hopes, and beliefs” (Lando, 1994, p. 14). As a member of a community who bears affection for and an identity infused with his or her particular links to places and landscapes, each author transmits competences, values, and meanings (the sense of place, an ethnoterritorial conscience, a sense of rootedness), the same ones which local people project onto the spaces in which they live their everyday lives.

Secondly, we argue that songs, like literature, are equally a source for ascertaining the sense and the meaning that a society attributes to a given territory. In fact, according to Edgar Morin (1965, p. 5), songs are “the most quotidian object of everyday consumption”. They cross all boundaries; people of all social environments, classes, and ages embrace them, and such songs are in turn filtered through “networks of images, leitmotifs, obsessions, and worldviews, which come together via the artist in his time and in his spaces” (Gaulin, 1995, p. 9). It is thus legitimate to explore the ways people express their relationship to space through songs. Numerous studies on the geographical dimension of the song have already shown this. Among these, to limit myself to a small set of examples, I can cite Béru’s analysis of rap as the cultural element which the media most frequently uses to symbolize the urban landscape of working class *banlieues* in France (2008); or Ursula Mathis-Moser’s study (2003) on the image of the “Arab” in contemporary French music, examined through the lens of Edward Said’s thought. There is also Chen Liu, Ning An, and Hong Zhu’s study (2015) on Chinese geopolitical strategy as parsed through the songs of the Spring Festival Gala on China Central Television. To return to Italy, one can also cite the works of Stefania Bettinelli (2002) and Loredana Piro (2010) on the image of places and territorial rootedness in the *œuvre* of two singer-songwriters, Francesco Guccini and Vinicio Capossela.

A Landscape Songwriter

This article will apply these theoretical assumptions to the work of Paolo Conte, an artist with a rich and inimitable personality, one of the greatest Italian *cantautori* (singer-songwriters). Born in Asti in 1937, P. Conte began performing his own songs almost accidentally, after having written for already-famous singers such as Adriano Celentano, Caterina Caselli, Patty Pravo, Enzo Jannacci, and Bruno Lauzi, as well as many others. Even after releasing his first LP, he rarely performed his own songs; writing was something he explored alongside his more “official” profession as a lawyer. It was thanks to Amilcare Rambaldi, president of the Club Tenco who promoted poetic songs, that P. Conte was truly able to begin his singing career. Invited to perform at the Ariston Theater in Sanremo in 1976, his talent was immediately recognized by celebrity singers, and soon afterwards by the Italian and European public. In 1985, he gave three concerts at Paris’s Théâtre de la Ville, and in 1998, *Rolling Stone* magazine listed *The Best of Paolo Conte* as one of the year’s best albums.

This ironic and reserved singer defines himself as “a rare landscape songwriter,” and considers music to be something that should “seek the resonances of our identity which are buried deep within us” (Conte in Malfatto, 1989, p. 56). I posit that his body of work can help us understand *how* the (geographical) fact is transformed in literary or artistic fiction, because it demonstrates the continuity that exists between perception and spatial imagination.

The following analysis is exclusively based on verbal elements – that’s to say, the artist’s own words (mainly from interviews) and the lyrics of his songs. Naturally, however, lyrics are only one of three fundamental components of a song, for songs are defined as the union of their lyrics, music, and the way they are performed. Nor can this art form be limited to the sum of its parts, but is born out of the process of their interactions, compensations, and mutual enrichment. This means that song lyrics are written to be sung, not to be read: they thus have no independent existence outside of

1. These are just several proofs of Conte’s renown. He has also released twenty albums, fifteen of which are studio recordings, five live. He has won many prizes and honors, as well, among them Chevalier of the French Ordre des Arts et Lettres and the Grande Médaille Vermeil de la Ville de Paris.

the rhythm and melody they come with. Analyzing these lyrics outside of their aural context thus makes for a questionable exercise in selection, of cut-and-paste. Nonetheless, this is a risk which must be taken, with a thousand precautions, in order to study a song's lyrics and to find their potential for narrative, description, and imagery.

Let us return, however, to Conte's own specific territorial anchoring. In fact, it is difficult to ignore the degree to which the singer's origins and personal geography weigh deeply on his poetry. P. Conte himself affirms this "ethnic" dimension to his inspiration, as well as his deep sense of territorial identity, his connection to the Piedmontese countryside. The landscapes and figures which populate his songs express his feelings of belonging and contain details and embellishments which provide local flavor. "I am a very proud, very fervid, very Alfierian² inhabitant of Asti." (Cotto, 2015, p. 70) Asti, the city where P. Conte was born and where he lived for many years³, is in the Piedmont region, between the Langhe and the Montferrat, an area which is particularly well known for the quality of its wines (Barbera, Barolo, Dolcetto, Moscato). Its rolling hillsides are covered in grape vines; one also sees poplars growing in rows there. The soil is clay, and wheat and corn are cultivated. Wine cellars and historic towers dot the landscape. This is the heart of a typical Italian province, a "slow territory," one with a well-defined local identity which manifests itself in a certain way of existence, of living and thinking, one which both supposes and reveals a social reality where a strong sense of place and local identity is an integral part of one's system of values. Here is how P. Conte depicts the physiognomy of his province:

Asti is an ancient and agricultural city, one that has always been – and still remains – a little bit wild. If it is unfortunately a little too resistant to change, the good thing about it is that it has (or had, more like) this marked presence of the countryside, a breath which, at least when I was a child, broke through at every street corner. I'm not a farmer; I've never lived the life of a farmer. I've never been in permanent, nearly exclusive contact with animals, with the countryside, and with the land, like real farmers and real country people. I talk about the beauty of a countryside that is opulent and wild at once, twisting and turning, splendid in its archaic way. (Conte in Cotto, 2015, p. 122-123)

P. Conte's identification with this countryside, a place at once guarded and archaic, opulent and wild – and almost always stifling – is also present in the vividness of his olfactory memories:

One of the happiest of my childhood memories is smelling freshly-picked wine grapes. We'd go through Asti during the days of the grape harvest and it felt like we were in a vat rather than in the city. (Conte in Cotto, 2015, p. 122)

There is yet another element – running parallel to the symbiotic interpenetration of city and country – which defines P. Conte's sense of belonging to this territory. This is sharing what he calls the "peasant codes": manners which are a bit rough, which shy away from all forms of frivolity:

The inhabitant of Asti is something of a desperate breed, someone who could not care less, who believes in everything and in nothing, whose feet are solidly anchored to the earth. (Conte, 2003, p. 69)

2. The adjective "Alfierian" refers to the playwright and author Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803), who was born in Asti, and his proud, tormented, and willful personality.

3. He still lives in the province of Asti, between Scurzolengo and Portacomaro.

I know them well, these rustic country folk and these difficult places. You'd think you were among Apaches or the Mescalero. I assure you, these people haven't a frivolous bone in their bodies. (Conte in Cotto, 2015, p. 59)

This rural, provincial microcosm, a bit closed off and suspicious, where people (who are so humble and to whom all frivolity is so foreign that they seem like Apaches or the Mescalero) identify with the place where they live (this haunting and opulent countryside, even a little difficult, which smells of wine grapes) profoundly marked the artist's character and personality ("I am a very proud *astigiano*"). Can traces of his background be found in his work? P. Conte himself affirms that he seeks inspiration for his songs in the concrete details of his everyday life. "The fact that I make things up and let my imagination run free doesn't mean that some of my songs aren't inspired by real things or events." (Cotto, 2015, p. 156) Or: "I come from the Po Valley. I sing what I've seen with my own eyes, or what my eyes believe they have seen, or imagined." (*ibidem*, 2015, p. 153) As will be explored in further depth later on, P. Conte sifts through his memories for material upon which to build his songs: memories, atmospheres, and stories all sedimented in time and in the provincial space in which he grew up and came to understand the world. His lived landscape, transfigured by artistic invention, gives rise to the landscape which he sings:

I consider myself a landscape singer. Landscapes are rarely sung about, and clearly I *sing the landscape that I know the best, the one of which I know some of its secrets, its scents*. My landscape is in the backcountry, but it's not far from the sea. From my home we can often smell the sea. On certain spring evenings, the wind blows in from the sea and we can feel the sea's presence. It's a very delicate, intimate, marvelous feeling; we know that it is near, and that with a good car we can be there in only half an hour. (Conte in Capasso, 2005, p. 23 – italicization ours).

This final quote also helps us understand another element of P. Conte's poetry: his universe, despite its provincial, archaic, and wild nature, is not entirely withdrawn into itself, nor is it isolated. The province of Asti is doubtlessly a small territory, a homeland, one whose singular individuality is founded on the confluence of landscape, cultural, and social dimensions, all of which make it seem lost in time, outside of history. Yet, specific temporal references exist within it, projecting us into the Italian 20th century, to the moment when the tragedy of the Second World War had just finished. This moment is evoked – once again via the landscape – in Conte's song "La Topolino amaranto"⁴: "The blonde/does not see through the window/that there is a landscape where everything is wrong/the storm has just finished/and six houses out of ten are in ruins." The war's end meant the end of nighttime blackouts. Once again, Asti could light up at night.⁵ For Paolo Conte, this meant – above all else – the reawakening of energies which had seemed as if asleep, a pleasant feeling of "returning to life," desiring redemption, freedom, to turn the page, to start fresh. The war's end also brought a physical encounter with America, "another world," as P. Conte many times termed it. "Cigarettes with a new smell," "faces that looked different from ours," "another way of walking." (Conte in Cotto, 2015, p. 44). The Liberation also brought the possibility of closer and freer knowledge of American music, notably jazz,⁶ which would become the artist's greatest passion.

4. The *Topolino* was a car produced by Fiat between 1936 and 1955.

5. See these lines from his song "Nottegiorno": "the dark is forgotten/ the blackout is over/and there's dancing in all the cities.../Milan is lit up/Turin is lit up/ and there's dancing in all the cities."

The contact between Asti, a rural province, a country landscape, and this breath of liberty and novelty, of cinema, music and myths, even sports like boxing, turned out to be explosive. “It was a whole world that arrived,” P. Conte put it (in Malfatto, 1989, p. 21). “America was freedom, it was strength and abundance” (in Cotto, 2015, p. 46). This period is very important for our *cantautore* who freely explores it, using it as a reservoir full of desires, myths, hopes, and expectations, collective passions and desires which reflect the Italian mindset of those years and all those who were ready to forget their disastrous (and recent) past and to start a new life:

I think that our identity was forged during that period and that it’s necessary to take a look at it from time to time. The Italian man of the postwar period is a prototype, because after the disasters of the war, he had the role of a solitary, defeated hero. This man needed to learn how to smile again, he needed to have adventures in life. He was destined to travel in every way, whether directly or in his imagination. (Conte in Cotto, 2015, p. 41).

The author doesn’t hide his predilection for this moment in Italian history – approximately from the end of WWII until the beginning of the 1960s. This period frames his songs. This was, after all, a crucial phase of transition which profoundly marked the character and the imagination⁷ of a generation of Italians, a generation that, clearly, P. Conte very much identifies as part of.⁸

Born of the intersection of these tensions is a certain taste for the exotic, which Paolo Conte interprets as “an Italian obsession, particularly characteristic of people from the provinces and of [his] generation” (in Romagnoli, 2008, p. 28). When rural Italians saw their desire to get away, fueled by images of the American “elsewhere” (jazz, boxing, cinema, etc.) frustrated by their real existence, their countryside and farming, the irrepressible charm of that American “elsewhere” took this symbolic form. Quite pertinent to our analysis, Anaïs Fléchet defines exoticism (2008) as that which relates to a space which is both faraway and undetermined, foreign and unknown. Dreams and stories of his provincial region, on the one hand, and exotism and the desire of flight elsewhere on the other: these are the two thematic pillars on which the narrative framework of many of Paolo Conte’s songs are built.

The representation of space and Paolo Conte’s poetry: “Emblematic mediators”

We have now discussed P. Conte’s origins, his territorial horizon (the province of Asti and its way of life) and his history (afterwar Italy, full of hopes, discovering the United States). We now turn to the way these aspects manifest in his texts as we analyze the spatial consistency of P. Conte’s thought, the way he builds representations of spaces, and how his songs contribute to our understanding of spatiality and territoriality.

One first observation can be made: there is an abundance of geographical references in his work. According to Angelo Turco, who considers geography intrinsically denotative, there are two ways of attributing names to places, which correspond to two kinds of designators. There are *accidental designators*, who attribute a vague and generic meaning to the world, and *rigid designators* who identify specific and singular places with precision (Turco, 1999, p. 98 and following). Both designators have their place in P. Conte’s repertoire. He evokes generic places and spaces such as the border, the

6. Because of the cultural embargo that the fascist regime imposed on the United States, jazz was officially forbidden in Mussolini’s Italy. P. Conte’s parents listened to records which they received in secret, just as they listened to Radio London and Radio France.

7. Discussing imagination would take us too far from the topic at hand. I limit myself here to defining it, in the words of Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (2003, p. 29-30), as the “sphere of representations and profoundly ambivalent affects” which is “inseparable from the mental or materialized works which each conscience uses to give meaning to their life, to their actions, and to their thought experiments.” Also see Bernard Debarbieux, *L’Espace de l’imaginaire* (2015). This author considers the imagination to be the background for all of our meaning-bearing schemas and all collective action. It builds our common ways of conceiving the world and conceiving our role within it.

8. “The protagonists of my songs...can be considered the mirror image of the people of my generation who, while they aren’t truly vanquished, have a kind of anxiety deep inside which hasn’t yet found its expression.” (Cotto, 2015, p. 48)

jungle, the metropolis, the mountain, as well as the oasis, the grasslands, a path, a plateau, the neighborhood, and ricefields. He also mentions identified places and spaces such as Alexandria, Africa, South America, Argentina, Berlin, China, France, Genoa, Havana, India, Marseille, Mexico, Milan, Minneapolis, Naples, Normandy, Paris, Picardy, Shanghai, Timbuktu, Turin, the Po Valley, Vienna, and Zanzibar. Beyond this list, however, which shows that the singer's repertoire is full of geographical references, things are much more complex and nuanced. We can see this, for example, in his song "Paris, les paris,"⁹ which Conte himself wrote in French. We first note the theme of this song: it is dedicated to one of the cities most intensely loved by the artist. His affection for Paris developed very early, at the time when P. Conte first visited the city, as a child, in the company of his father and brother, on a trip meant to reward the two schoolboys. Later, his feelings developed into an affinity for Paris. With time, P. Conte became familiar, felt almost fraternally towards Paris and towards France. "The French are a bit like the people of Piedmont. They make me feel at home." (in Cotto, 2015, p. 28). This city, "first dreamed, for a long time, then finally met," has become for the artist "an oasis of peace..., a place where I feel welcome" (*ibidem*, p. 29-30). It was there where he gained the recognition which opened the doors to the stages of Europe for him. It is thus hardly surprising that he has dedicated more than one song to Paris,¹⁰ and that he holds the place in sincere admiration. The lyrics of "Paris, les paris" make it clear: for Conte, Paris isn't just any place, one among others, but a city "full of advantages," rich in "charm" and "courage." In this song, one also notices the geographical referent's ambiguity. It is based on wordplay, for here "paris" designates both the toponym and an action. The toponym itself suggests the numerous faces of the city: it is "waves which laugh like jokes," "the color of the storm." And there is the word "paris"'s own polysemy. ("Paris, *paris* [wagers] of courage/color of the storm/storm full of *paris*" – which here both means the city and the action of betting, of making a wager). In the context of this sung text's orality, this polysemy reinforces its ambiguity.

Another of Conte's songs dedicated to Paris allows us to further understand the role geography plays in the singer's poetry. In his 1981 album *Paris Milonga*, "Parigi" is yet another homage to this special place, a major part of his emotional and personal geography. This song – which tells quite a romantic story of two people in love who meet in the rain and find each other once again at a small hotel – leads us to analyze P. Conte's narrative techniques, particularly the one which he refers to as the "technique of reserve." A short anecdote, in Conte's own word, will help us understand what this means:

Everything plays around the line: "All around there's nothing but rain, rain, rain, and France." But whereas I, as I'm Italian, I like that line and it sounded good when I wrote it, (because for me, as an Italian, France is a foreign place), when I had the possibility to have my song translated into French, I understood that the translator was reticent to say it like that, just as I would have been if I'd been asked to say "rain, rain, rain, and Italy." And if I said, "all around there's nothing but rain, rain, rain, and Holland"? I asked the translator. He told me, "Yes, yes, that works very well." (Conte, 2003, p. 15-16)

Beyond the question of chosen signifiers, I would like to focus for a moment on the fact that here, places serve the function of "emblematic mediators" (according to P. Conte's own definition), which carry a strong evocative charge. In other words, the toponym is not the simple substitute for the named object, "an indicator indifferent to

9. Paolo Conte, Album *Razmataz*, 2000.

10. As well as a musical revue, *Razmataz*, which takes place in Paris in the 1920s.

reality”; instead, it has its own weight and its own worth (Jakobson, 1977, p. 46). A literal translation of Paolo Conte’s text lost the strong feeling that the noun France provokes for an Italian listener – this is why, in the French version of the song, Holland replaces France. This shows that toponyms have a subtler role to play than that of a simple spatial reference. The artist’s choice of designators is thus no accident, nor are the places named interchangeable at will; his choice of toponyms follows a specific logic, one that is creative, poetic, cultural, and emotional.

Tension between the province and elsewhere

These first few examples show that any critical reconstruction of an author like P. Conte’s spatial thinking requires going beyond the simple geolocation of the real places mentioned in his texts. It is thus necessary to focus less on specific songs and more on bunches or groups of his songs in which certain themes, myths, or central figures are clearly mobilized. I will limit my analysis to two themes which are particularly dear to P. Conte, both of which are also veritable geographical archetypes: the province and “elsewhere.” To a certain degree, these equal the “home-away” concept so dear to Anglo-American humanistic geography.¹¹ The province is not only a specific lived space (Asti and its markedly-present countryside); it is a universal poetic and existential category which condenses diffuse geographical elements and unites different territorial realities. In P. Conte’s own words (Campo, 1993): “where I’m from, there’s a lot of province,” or “almost all of Italy is province.” One must understand the symbolic meaning which the author attributes to the word “province,” one which goes beyond the specific nature of one territory or another. For Conte, “the province” is not only a lived space, but rather the emblem of living with difficulty in it. Its opposite is “elsewhere,” a place to escape to, lands and spaces of adventure and flight, exoticism, imagination, of dreams, of enigma and of mystery. (I will return to this point below).

Let us examine this question via a little journey through P. Conte’s repertoire. Songs such as “La Fisarmonica di Stradella” (1974), “Genova per noi” (1975), “Bartali” (1979), and “Diavolo Rosso” (1982), among others, are illustrations of what Sefano Colangelo (2009, p. 163) calls a provincial “epic of the poor,” a small world in which events take place and people meet one another at a slower pace than elsewhere, a real “microcosm” (as Claudio Magris would put it) made of a thousand small details:

The province is certainly shaped and modeled: if you look closely, it bears more small details than any large city. And these thousand small details make the province easier to read for someone who really wants to take inspiration from reality, to sing it or to recount people’s lived experiences. (Conte in Di Gennaro, 2015, p. 64)

The province is a haze of days which all resemble one another, of fog and grey skies. It is rain and storms, carts on frozen tracks, the radio (“They said it on the radio today and it’s true,” is one line in Conte’s “La Fisarmonica di Stradella” [“The Accordion of Stradella”]).¹² It is Sunday night dances, and houses with ugly brown sitting rooms. It is lovers in the fields, the unchanging landscape of ricefields, the croaking of frogs; it is wind, straw, and hay. It is white spaces near farms, and it is conviviality: (“Come along with us/let’s drink some orangeade” in the song “Diavolo rosso” [“Red Devil”]). But most of all, the province is time spent waiting. Waiting for someone or

11. In the thought of J. Douglas Porteous (1985), one of the seminal figures of English-language humanistic geography, the *home-away* pair evokes, respectively, being at home, domestic space, and the meaning of the home space – vs. travel, detaching from one’s roots, going elsewhere (away).

12. Stradella is an Italian town in the province of Pavia; it is one of the world’s major centers for making accordions. All English translation by Clara Leon.

something, waiting to be jolted out of the daily tedium. One can wait for a sight of an unexpected landscape, whose colors, scents, and flavors seduce and surprise (“Genova per noi” [“Genoa for us”]). Or perhaps it is the one who is waiting’s impatience that is described: waiting “on the wide road/full of dust” for the moment when, around the bend, there appears “the sad nose of a joyous Italian” (in “Bartali” [“Bartali”]). Another song describes an unexpected, late-night visit by the ghost of Chick Webb, the great swing drummer (“Gong-oh”); yet another recounts the vision, out of an airplane window, of a large grand piano, sparkling upon the sea (“Aguaplano”). The previously-mentioned “La Fisarmonica di Stradella” tells of an accordion unexpectedly resounding in the air, transforming the fog into a magical atmosphere, one where everything “seemed to be as if within/a glass of pastis.” In each of these cases, an unexpected, desired, or even merely imagined event makes an interruption into everyday life, providing a frisson, a new emotion, an invitation to step outside of the monotony of unchanging days on end, to get away, to transgress the rules, to reach for joy. But this liberation is fleeting, and soon it’s back to everyday life. The Piedmontese villager, after a visit to Genoa, has to go home to the stagnant countryside where “fat red shrimp are a dream.” In “Bartali,” newspapers fly about in the middle of a deserted road as “the orange dusk falls”; by dawn, the ghosts of Harlem disappear like the dream they were; the airplane climbs higher into the sky, returning to “the bay-colored world.”

As Paolo Conte has more than once explained, “Genova per noi” [“Genoa for us”] is a song about the shock between the countryside and the sea, and about the anxiety felt by a person who lives in the immobile countryside when faced with an ever-moving vista of water (“But what fear this dark sea provokes in us/it moves even at night/and never holds still.”)¹³ These two geographic and human environments meet in a movement from the backcountry to the coast, from Piedmont to Liguria and back again. In the song “Chi guarda Genova” [“Those who Look at Genoa”] by the singer-songwriter Ivano Fossati, however, this perspective is totally reversed: “Chi guarda Genova sappia che Genova/si vede solo dal mare” [“Those who look at Genoa should know that Genoa/only sees itself from the sea”]. Like in Leibniz’s “perspectivism,” the same city viewed from a different perspective seems completely other, and thus it is multiplied; though they both start from the same reference, each artist represents it in a very different way.¹⁴ For another example of this shift in perspective, see box 1.

The other figure which represents the opposite of the province, a place where one can escape from one’s frustrated ambitions and dashed dreams, is “elsewhere,” as evoked, for example, in Conte’s song “Sotto le stelle del jazz” [“Under the Stars of Jazz”]. Conte clearly explains the “generational” and “provincial” mold which forged the exotic elsewhere in the following statement: “For us, late 20th-century Italians, South America represents the ultimate of exoticism, a faraway ‘elsewhere’ where we could escape the ordinary and reject our everyday lives” (in Cotto, 2015, p. 64).

If the province represents boredom, fog and haze, solitude and existential collapse, “elsewhere” is the promise of adventure, of a new start, of happiness. This is depicted in songs such as “Via con me,” “Onda su onda,” “Fuga all’inglese” and “Molto lontano” [“Come along with me,” “From wave to wave,” “English runaway,” “Far Away”]. But where is this elsewhere? It is in Africa, as much in Shanghai as it is in Paris, in Uruguay as it is in Berlin. And for a slightly-primitive man from Asti like our author, even a simple daytrip to Liguria or to Genoa becomes a journey which provokes confusion in all those who dream of other landscapes: the sea, or the “else-

13. All of the English translations of Paolo Conte’s texts in this paragraph are by Clara Leon.

14. Perhaps it is no accident that unlike Paolo Conte, Ivano Fossati is from Genoa.

Box 1 / Qualities of the summer

We can see another example of this perspective shift in songs like “Azzurro,” “Una giornata al mare” and “Un gelato al limon.” These three songs reject all the stereotypes of the “seaside songs” (Gentile, 2005) which were popular in Italy in the 1960s: fabulous vacations, the sun and the sea, beach parasols, suntans, being carefree, summer loving... “Azzurro” [“Azure”] – performed to great success by Adriano Celentano in 1968 – focuses on how lonely and abandoned those who stay in the city feel: “I search for summer the whole year long/and suddenly, unexpectedly it’s come/she left for the beach/I remain up here alone in town.” The song “Una giornata al mare” (“A Day at the Seaside”) also focuses on this lonely feeling, when one is at a remove from all that’s going on: “The ladies’ laughter rains upon my head/... /A day at the seaside/so as not to die/in the shadow of a dream.” “Un gelato al limon” [“Lemon gelato”] narrates “the sensuality of desperate lives” in the depths of a city while “the hot night makes us melt.” Solitude, melancholy, shadows, and despair..., all of the qualities which are habitually associated with the summer in our society of consummation are here inverted (the French translation of the songs in this box is taken from Monique Malfatto, 1989).

* The song “Azzurro” is peculiar; there is, in fact, a problem of attribution. The lyrics were written by Vito Pallavicini, one of the greatest Italian lyricists. Fabio Canessa, who wrote in depth on the origins of this piece (Canessa, 2008), however, describes “Azzurro” as a composite kaleidoscope, a condensation, a perfect synthesis between three personalities and their poetic universes: Pallavicini himself, Celentano, and Conte. (Conte’s influence can be seen, for example, in the exoticism in such lines as “I’m looking in the gardens for a little bit of Africa/between the oleander and the baobab.”) P. Conte later sang this song onstage and recorded it for several of his albums – *Concerti* (1985), *Tournée* (1993), and *The Best of Paolo Conte* (1998); on their disk jackets, he is accredited as the song’s sole author.

where” of the countryside. What matters is the flight: elsewhere is everywhere but here. It can be far away, as it is, for instance, when associated with the “jasmine of black Africa” or “a Peruvian horn,” – unless it is too far away, and we begin to doubt that “elsewhere” exists at all. Clearly germane to the issue is the fact that Conte, as he affirmed himself, has never truly been a traveler (“I don’t have the soul of a tourist,” in Malfatto, 1989, p. 89). Conte’s songs bring us into a deliberately-indeterminate topodeictical sphere, one where a single, vague, open, evocative reference can easily bear multiple meanings (Zublena, 2007). Beyond the plurality of his images, however, Paolo Conte’s “elsewhere” refers not so much to any specific territory as to an imagined territoriality which takes on many varied and different forms. It can be a faraway city as in “Dancing,” “all in pearl, silver, wind, iron, and fire”; or “a little bit of jungle” as in “Collegli trascurati” [“Neglected Colleagues”]. It can also be a tropical island, a paradise with its “rhythms, songs, dream women, bananas, raspberries” as in “Onda su onda” [“From Wave to Wave”]. All of these place-based images are, however, accessible to each and every listener because they come from the media: they are all deeply rooted in the geographical imagination of Italian postwar culture, popularized by movies, songs, and American-imported comics. This means that more than one generation of Italians has come to know their “elsewhere” through their imagination and via representations, rather than by direct experience. This also means that, in appropriating new ways of thinking, of speaking, and even of dreaming, these Italians see themselves and the spaces in which they exist intermediated through these images. It is symptomatic that P. Conte, for instance, described the people of Asti’s character by comparing them to Native Americans. “You’d think you were among Apaches or the Mescalero”; taciturn, proud, and untamed, fiercely independent peoples. And he affirms, “When Westerns first started being shown in Italy, the Indians were always

the bad guys and white people were always the heroes, but my generation was immediately fascinated by the Indians, by these savage nomads who were our opposite.” (Conte in Capasso, 2013, p. 135) Their opposites, perhaps, but at the same time, not so different that they didn’t feel familiar!

Conte’s song “Chi siamo noi” [“Who We Are”] well-displays these tensions between “here” and “elsewhere.” Every image juxtaposes the province, where one lives in an “immense yawn,” in “slumbering opening onto silence,” in winter and in wind, one’s “coat collar/turned up,” to the curiosity of those who, like latter-day Bastian Cabotos and Vasco de Gamas, cross the ocean searching for “American marvels” and “the virginity of the world.” The encounter between them does not give rise to any drama, however, but rather a somewhat-melancholy reverie where two contrasting lives seem to reconcile within the pulsation of a rumba beat. “Chi siamo noi” is another notable example of P. Conte’s “technique of reserve.”

I strongly feel this desire for elsewhere that is so typical of 20th century authors, so I write songs which tell ordinary stories – or which start from ordinary stories, at least – and then project them into more colorful, more theatrical worlds. “Technique of reserve” because I don’t know these worlds from lived, empirical experience, nor can I describe them as if I had lived them. At the same time, they fascinate me, so I try to capture them and use them as settings for my songs which, I want to be clear, are all true stories, or based on true stories. (Conte in Di Gennaro, 2015, p. 64)

Conte’s “technique of reserve” is thus based on a *strategy of projection*, that’s to say, on moving stories from the province into a more colorful, more theatrical context, which gives them wider value. It is a technique which allows these lived experiences, tied to a particular context, to be transposed into a universal context where they can “make a Parisian listener’s heart beat” (*ibidem*). In this way, Conte’s songs can be shared and can garner much wider acclaim.

There is one point (one place) where the figures of the province and “elsewhere” meet. The place which brings these seemingly so disparate worlds together is the *Mocambo*,¹⁵ the little bar which gives its name to the saga told in four songs: “Sono qui con te sempre più solo” [“I am here with you always more alone”], 1974; “La Ricostruzione del Mocambo” [The Reconstruction of the Mocambo], 1975; “Gli impermeabili” [“The Raincoats”], 1984, and “La Nostalgia del Mocambo” [“The Nostalgia of the Mocambo”], 2004. The Mocambo bar is also where these four songs are set. These four songs all explore the themes of solitude, of things that cannot be communicated (“I am here with you always more alone”) and the attempts that one makes to dream beyond one’s means (“While I am doing my best to find something else/and I try another way”). The owner of the Mocambo represents the postwar Italian seeking to discover the world; despite his financial and romantic misfortunes, he gets back on his feet time and again, decided – even though each time he’s more and more beat up – to follow his ideals and start once more ... to make the same mistakes. “To dream beyond one’s means” means to take a gamble, but a necessary gamble in order to survive and to move on, despite life’s disappointments and failures. This bittersweet “moral” to the story seems to be the “truth” that the singer from Asti transmits, giving it as he does so a specific spatial form.

15. *Mocambo* is a name of African origin used in Brazil to mean a shelter, a refuge, or a community of escaped slaves (Correia de Lira, 2010). In the 1940s and 1950s, however, it was also the name of a South-American themed, exotic nightclub on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, where many movie stars liked to go!

Allegorical Displacement and Universality

Let us once more take up our questions about Contian geography in light of what we have hitherto said, seeking now to answer them. Can we, in fact, speak of “spatial thinking” in Paolo Conte’s *œuvre*? The response can only be affirmative: space is clearly one of the most characteristic traits his poetry bears. Nor is this only because of how strongly P. Conte defends his roots, his condition as a “man of his territory” who loves the places he holds dear (Asti, the Po Valley, the countryside...). These aspects obviously bring to bear, of course, but beyond them, we have seen that on multiple levels the singer’s repertoire rebounds with geography, with places, with landscapes and voyages (accomplished more in the imagination than in reality). There are fragrances and tastes – familiar or unusual (“While we look upon Genoa/We sniff in its scents, too” and “While in the shadows of their cupbords/Shirts and old lavender waits” in “Genova per noi” [“Genoa for us”]). These lines also have a generational tonality. Conte expresses the postwar Italians’ desire for redemption and, in the saga of Mocambo, portrays their illusions and defeats, always through an ironic and sympathetic lens. He also includes recurring, recognizable geographical themes and figures: the province and elsewhere, spaces which at once oppose and complement each other. (“I’m looking in the gardens for a little bit of Africa/between the oleander and the baobab” in “Azzurro” [“Azure”]). Paolo Conte expresses his spatial thinking via analogy and metaphor, using them as rhetorical and discursive strategies. He also displaces stories in an allegorical way, projecting ordinary tales (of local, provincial origin) into a more colorful, more theatrical world, (often the new setting is an exotic place). This imbues them with new, universal meaning so that anyone at all, on any latitude at all, can understand and relate to them.

As such, a song, just like a work of literature, contributes to our understanding of space by telling us how a city, a landscape, or a place can be experienced (Rosemberg, 2012, p. 33-34), offering us a novel perspective on the world. P. Conte’s songs teach us that Paris is not only a city, but also a storm full of wagers (in French, “paris.”) We learn that Spanish rain falls in Berlin, that there are vertical water landscapes (the rain) as well as horizontal ones (the sea), and that after six o’ clock, the Po Valley looks like a glass of Pastis. One can both wish to be thrilled by a place and fear the thrill of that same place; if one looks carefully, one can see Shanghai in the avenues of Vienna, that Mexico is the sad face of the Americas, that the ghibli can blow from behind a closed door,¹⁶ and that summer is also synonymous with solitude and discontentment... In other words, they stimulate our geographical imagination (Raffestin, 1983), our capacity to feel “there” when we are here, and “here” when we are “there”. These geographical figures lead us to discover – or simply notice – something unexpected in our everyday reality, to see it in a new way, a glance from a new, lateral perspective. Imagination, the site where one meets the unexpected, introduces strange, displaced elements into our reality and becomes the antidote to the tyranny of the familiar and the habitual. Thus, the flight “elsewhere” is a flight away from death.

16. The ghibli or sirocco is a hot wind from North Africa.

Box 2 / Original lyrics of cited Paolo Conte songs

- *La Topolino amaranto* [The Amaranthine Topolino]

« *Bionda/non guardar dal finestrino/che c'è un paesaggio che non va/è appena finito il temporale/e sei case su dieci sono andate giù* »

- *Nottegiorno*

« *il buio è dimenticato/l'oscuramento è finito/e si balla in tutte le città/.../Si è illuminata Milano/Si è illuminata Torino/e si balla in tutte le città* »

- *"Paris, les paris"* [Paris, the wagers]

"Paris, paris de courage/couleur de l'orage/orage plein de paris"

- *La Fisarmonica di Stradella* [The Accordion of Stradella]

« *L'ha detto anche oggi la radio, ed è vero* »

« *che sembra essere dentro a un bicchiere/di acqua e anice* »

- *Diavolo rosso* [Red Devil]

« *vieni qui con noi a bere un'aranciata* »

- *Bartali*

« *sullo stradone/impolverato* »

« *naso triste da italiano allegro* »

« *tramonta questo giorno in arancione* »

- *Genova per noi* [Genoa for us]

« *i gamberoni rossi sono un sogno* » ;

« *ma che paura ci fa quel mare scuro/che si muove anche di notte e non sta fermo mai* »

« *mentre guardiamo Genova/ed ogni volta l'annusiamo* »

« *nell'ombra dei loro armadi/tengono lini e vecchie lavande* »

- *Aguaplano*

« *nel mondo dal bel colore baio* »

- *Azzurro* [Azure]

Cerco l'estate tutto l'anno/e all'improvviso eccola qua/Lei è partita per le spiagge/e sono solo quassù in città »

Cerco un po' d'Africa in giardino/tra l'oleandro e il baobab

- *Una giornata al mare* [A Day at the Seaside]

« *cadono sulla mia testa le risate delle signore/.../una giornata al mare /tanto per non morire/nelle ombre di un sogno* »

- *Un gelato al limon* [Lemon Gelato]

« *la sensualità delle vite disperate* »

« *la notte calda ci scioglierà* »

- *Dancing*

« *tutta di madreperla, argento, vento, ferro, fuoco* »

- *Collegli trascurati* [Neglected Colleagues]

« *un po' di jungla* »

- *Onda su onda* [From Wave to Wave]

« *ritmi, canzoni, donne di sogno, banane, lamponi* »

- *Sono qui con te sempre più solo* [I am here with you always more alone!]

« *Sono qui con te sempre più solo* »

« *mentre mi sto ingegnando e tento una via* »

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