

## Bodies, Anti-Bodies and Nobodies

Gregory Whitehead

Toward the end of his life, Guglielmo Marconi came to believe that acoustic phenomena continued to hang in the air until well after the moment of their first sounding. Since he interpreted sounds as bodies of vibrations with an envelope of decay extending theoretically to infinity, Marconi reasoned that the sensation of silence – dead air – was merely a matter of perceptual imperfection.

In order to tune in the accumulated clamour of history across all time and space, one need only develop more refined technologies of reception, filtering and amplification. Working from this premise, Marconi may well have imagined a radio free from both stations and transmitters; listeners would simply tap into whatever variously decomposed signals happened to be passing through their immediate environment.

In this vision, radio would provide an electronic portal into a vast repository of tightly compressed utterances and acoustic information, a memory chamber for the living, but also a pulsating city of the dead. *Dead voices on air.*

While, in America, the identity of radio-as-music-box was firmly and irretrievably entrenching itself, Marconi's countryman F.T. Marinetti (himself still fresh from the trenches) conceived precisely such an electronic gateway into the nether world of partially decayed acoustic envelopes. In his 1933 manifesto *La Radia*, Marinetti proposes, 'The pure organization of radiophonic sensations ... the picking up, amplification, and transfiguration of the vibrations emitted by living beings, living and dead spirits ... and materials.'

Though Marconi probably would have rejected Marinetti's black-shirted bravura 'to multiply one-hundredfold the creative genius of the Italian race,' he

certainly would have endorsed the search for a radiophony generated from the circuitries of worlds not entirely our own.

The thoroughly unparalleled and regrettably unexplored potential of radio as a medium for researching things past was also on the mind of Gaston Bachelard in 1951: 'Radio really does represent the total, daily realization of the human psyche.'

In his now almost forgotten essay, *Radio And Reverie*, Bachelard conceives the radio artist as 'psychic engineer,' whose purpose is 'to develop subjects for radio aimed at the unconscious ... to lay on splendid nights for their listeners.' Possibilities for achieving blissful states of reverie would be presented via the hands of the psychic engineer on every wavelength.

To Marconi's sprawling necropolis-on-air and Marinetti's medium of pure sensation, Bachelard thereby proposes radio as the most natural means for articulating the coded, subterranean languages of dreams and the unconscious. Burning an electro-acoustic fire, radio may even induce a blissful state of utter hypnosis.

Some 20 years later, Roland Barthes, a close reader of Gaston Bachelard, who also wrote from the perspective of bliss, offered a tantalizing project of *writing aloud*: 'What it searches for are the pulsational incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony.' Might we not think of *radio* from the perspective of bliss? Roland Barthes even suggested to us what its effect may be: 'It granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes.' That Barthes singles out *cinema* as the most likely site for the projection of such carnal stereophony is a telling indication of how *much* our radio has indeed failed to come.

Within the context of contemporary American culture, such radiophonic identities sound deliriously Utopian because they dare suggest that the most critical electro-acoustic relationship exists not between markets and demographics, but between the inconstant pleasures of the desiring ear and the unpredictable outcomings of signals on the loose.

But in the midst of an epoch where every popular excrescence presents itself as an act of nature, it is crucial to remember that our electronic culture is not the inevitable consequence of inflexible technologies. While each of the above texts may suggest radio is still in *search* of a technology, the hyper-agitated radio we now transmit succeeds only in devouring itself, passing virtually unnoticed from body to antibody to nobody.

Nevertheless, the inescapable indictment that we do actually have the radio we deserve should never be permitted to obliterate the anticipations of an *other* radio we may someday desire.

---

in SOUND BY ARTISTS  
edited by Lander/Mexier

Art Metropole, 1990