

# WHO'S THERE?

## NOTES ON THE MATERIALITY OF RADIO

GREGORY WHITEHEAD

On 12 December 1901 Guglielmo Marconi tapped out the letter S in Morse Code and cast it adrift as the first transatlantic radio text. Since then artists from many disciplines — acting from widely divergent backgrounds and motivations — have turned to radio as a site for their activities. But because such turnings (and tunings) have been so historically random and culturally dispersed, their periodic transmission has left unaddressed a question so elemental it now sounds almost anachronistic: what is the *material* radio, what is the 'on air' made of?

This question is never asked. In fact, the contemporary reduction of radio to the subordinate role of distribution slave for other media is so deeply entrenched there is scarcely anyone to ask it. Not only is nobody thinking about radio; thinking about radio has become almost unthinkable. What, then, *is* the material of radio? In 1984, in the midst of gathering materials for my first radio essay, I inscribed the outlines of an answer into the soapstone walls of a cave metaphor. The idea of approaching a theory of radio art from the perspective of speleology was at that time doubly appealing because it had become something of a commonplace to refer to radio as "the cave of the imagination", and because it was inside caves that the human species first

confronted its own compulsive scribbblings, when the theoretical scrutiny of writing was at its climax. And so I needled myself with pointed questions, like: What might it mean to leave traces of our presence across the undulations of electromagnetic waves? What might it mean, not to write *for* radio, but to *write* radio?

### SPELEOLOGY

In a 'schizophonic' culture, experience of disembodiment, transmigration and time-travel is an everyday occurrence. Taking this experience as its raw material — and schizophonic technology (microphone, telephone, tape recorder, mixer, razor blade) as its means — the radio text excavates the internal radio-cave. Writing radio is an art of speleology; the radio text is a *speleogram*.

The excavations I have in mind have nothing to do with the sound effect, or with high-tech processing, but instead work through selection, montage, idea: the simplicity of the cut. The goal of the radio text is not to distort or impress, but to bring deeply buried desires and insights *back into the light*, to permit the coupling of all those who have never been properly introduced: the live and the dead, history as it is documented and history as it is remembered, the intranslatable versus the transpar-

ently obvious, the improbably-situated versus the fortunately out-of-place.

Radio is intensely present tense, yet it speaks from outside time. And while the pressure of its muzzle against the ear may assume a certain intimacy, we only know the bodies of our interpolators through the bodies of their voice.

Writing radio accomplishes, mistakes and manipulates two essential separations — the separation of the acoustic event from the time and place of its occurrence, and the separation of the utterance from the physical immediacy of the one who utters. The pleasure of the radio text resides in a kind of blissful interruption; interrupted because it never really happens, and blissful because it never really has to.

If radio has everything to do with language, what is the language of radio? To my ears, radio language comes close to the language of memory and dreams; here is the real meaning of the cave metaphor. There is something *dark* about radio, a darkness produced by its fundamental sense of displacement, its proximate otherness. As speleology maps the cave, writing radio puts into relief the supple contours of the human unconscious. Who knows what might come to light in front of the lamp, in front of the radio?

## THE DEAD NOTHING

Over the past five years I have contributed roughly five hours of material to the vast electronic necropolis of contemporary broadcasting, programs that are now in varying stages of decomposition as they rattle their way through the international networks of public radio. Though the ostensible subjects of my essays and plays have covered a broad range of fictive and documentary subjects, I have tried to inhabit each piece with a spirit of inquiry into the nature of my radiophonic materials — or

perhaps into their strangely *unnatural* predisposition. For this reason I hesitate to characterise my own activity as ‘radio art’, but rather as philosophical meditations and poetic excursions into conceptual territories whose vaporous plots would appear to implicate the ghostlike disorientation of being on air.

So what *has* come to light in front of the lamp, in front of the radio? I confess to a certain degree of nostalgia in remembering those early days when I still possessed the energetically naive confidence of the hero/explorer who looks out into a vast virgin wilderness, convinced I would soon become its master, draw its map, savour the pleasures of its most spectacular flora and fauna. But for all its allures, the subterranean wilderness of radio art resists facile cartography precisely because its most telling landmarks are made *out of nothing*. To complicate matters further, the radio cave defeats standard procedures of theoretical illumination, for the simple reason that it comes most fervently to life only when it’s dark. Finally, my strengthening suspicion is that the life of radio is in fact an *afterlife*, that the cave is most vibrant *when the air is most dead*.

I am convinced that this dead ‘nothing’ of a radio will yield its inner circuitry only if one follows a suitably circuitous route. Consequently, I have drawn my insights and methods from disciplines as diverse as graphology and forensic anthropology, from the hard science of fossils to the soft science of wounds. Along the way I have shared dialogue with a cast of real and imaginary characters, ranging from a man whose life ambition is to recite the entire *Illiad* from memory to one of the world’s leading authorities on the cultural significance of radical rhinoplasty. A full recounting of my five years of cutting face-to-face against such curious occlusions of

human desire would probably strain your credulity. So I will restrict myself to a question that both haunts and animates the whole endeavour to find a material in the void space of a dead nothing . . .

#### WHO'S THERE?

Return for a moment to Marconi's searching dot-dot-dot. With the rapid twitching of his index finger, he triggers a question that has resounded through history since humans were first confronted with the coded 'signings' of absent others: *who's there?*

To some extent, this question is posed by all media: what is so different about radio? Or to put it more directly; what specific qualities constitute the difference of the radio text? It is my belief that a theory of radio must situate itself within an elaborated phenomenology of this difference. In much the same way that contemporary film theory centres on the duplicities of spectatorship and the gaze, on the looker and the looked upon, a theory of radio must include the all-or-nothing of the other-to-other transmission.

The invisible anonymity punctuating both sides of the radio signal explains the reason for asking 'who' is there; but where is 'there'? Or, to rewind, in what way is the 'who' implicated by the 'there', and where does this take place? The mistake I made in my earlier speleological speculations was to collapse the dimensions of radiophonic space with the usually cramped confines of the production studio. The real site of radio, however, is not in the studio or the station, but rather in the highly provisional and politically delicate relationship of complicity that exists between artist and listener — a relationship that is simultaneously enhanced and endangered by the potentially infinite, infinitely empty domain of abstract air.

The exposed vulnerability intrinsic to every act of audition, combined with the

physical fragility of the inner ear, presents a stark contrast to the rigorous objectifications performed by the *hardest* organ in the human body: the eye. Distinct from every other entrance to the human body, the ear is a hole we cannot close, permitting a level of intimacy among perfect strangers which in other media would be literally unheard of.

Here, then, is how I figure radiophonic space: *a public channel produced by an absent other entering into a private ear*. The material specific to radio inscribes itself within the thoroughly unpredictable libidinal circulations internal to a ménage-à-trois. The language of radio is thus constructed not from a series of applied techniques, but from a series of fragile complicities. What is the transmission, and what does it comprise? Why is the radio on? What is it that *keeps* the radio on? Who is out there, and why does it matter? A radio work is successful only to the degree that it can keep such a tangle of questions *open* and *on*, engaging the desires and needs of the invisible listener in the thoughts and pleasures of its dissemination. From dissemination, a transmission; from transmission, an interference; from interference, a complicity; and from complicity, the sound of something dripping in the darkest caverns of the cerebral cave.

#### THE WAREHOUSE OF UNDELIVERED FEELING

One of the very few bodies of work exploring the artistic implications of radiophonic triangulation appeared in West Germany during the 1960s under the generic classification of *Das Neue Hörspiel*. Regrettably, by the early 1970s this initiative devolved into an altogether different direction: the fluid space of pure radio suddenly congealed into either the solipsistic manipulations of later-modern composers or the conceptually vapid diversions of heavy-handed *technokinder*.

Far from submitting to the temptations of rapidly proliferating technologies, radio can only achieve itself through a reflective affirmation of the idiosyncratic and occasionally perverse configurations of the broadcast 'audition'. From the perspective of material production, the implications of the invisible triangles — on air and in the ear — make radiophony an exacting habitation: balancing so many elsewheres, others, and unanswerables is difficult and not for everybody. If radio is to survive inside the play of so many ciphers, the body of the text must reflect in its own composition the aesthetic properties of its environment: the structural multiplicity, the labyrinthine anticipations and interruptions, the sensations of loss and longing, the electro-eroticised comings and goings, the anomalous mix of sensuality and intelligence, of intimacy and objectivity, of frontal physicality and truncated absence.

My own excursive transmission through radiophonic space began with an essay entitled *Dead Letters*. The formal definition of a dead letter is: *a letter which can neither be delivered nor returned*. After spending several days interviewing handwriting specialists deep inside the U.S. Central Post Office, I began to think of the Dead Letter Office as a *warehouse of undelivered feeling*. The fate of the dead letter is essential for all radio producers to contemplate, because in the wrong hands the cave of the imagination can easily assume the functional identity of the DLO. Inside the warehouse of undelivered feeling, it is certainly as *dark* as it is inside the cave of the imagination. The difference between the two is circumscribed by what is made *out* of the dark. *Out of the dark*. Here resides the locus, material, and goal of the radio text: *Who's there?*

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