

## Here Comes Everybody

Gregory Whitehead, for the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, November 29, 2006

[http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Whitehead/Gregory\\_Whitehead-Here\\_Comes\\_Everybody.mp3](http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Whitehead/Gregory_Whitehead-Here_Comes_Everybody.mp3)

Communication *is* Community, and it is also true that sooner or later everybody does come through the grand wash of the airwaves, thick with a fog that must be the product of something hot, wet and meaningful.

And suddenly there she is:

Mother radio, wholesome and mature, but still more than a little bit sexy, wearing her proper Sunday best, but with her chic black boots telling us she still knows how to kick it, and where --- her arms extended in an open and generous invitation into her seemingly limitless.... public domain. The irresistible enchantments of radiophonic space: no boundaries, no bouncers, no ticket takers or coat checkers. And no unsightly bodies, with their problematic variations in skin pigmentation or footwear or pierced flesh. Radiophonic space, the most sublime *ou topos* of them all, a wide open no place that positively vibrates with communicative potential and utopian possibility: ubiquitous, yet intimate, godlike voices, hanging in the wind, who could ever resist them?

I, too, have dreamed, often, of that time when everybody lives breathes and touches each other on air, for that is the dream that Mother Radio dreams every night, and if you climb into that big comfy bed with her, you have no choice but to dream her dream. For those who hold deep beliefs regarding the creation of free, autonomous and sustainable communities via these near magical properties of broadcast, the intoxicating dream of radio utopia is guaranteed to induce a most pleasurable buzz. The problem comes later, the morning after, as a nasty electromagnetic hangover wrapped inside a lethal headache.

Consider the paradoxical case of Velimir Khlebnikov, and his bold 1921 proposal for radio as “the spiritual sun of the country”, that would radiate the unearthly songs of lightning birds. Poised in the control room, the Great Sorcerer at Radio Khlebnikov would mesmerize the national consciousness, healing the sick via hypnotic suggestion and even increasing worker productivity through seasonally metrical notation, “for it is a known fact that certain notes like *la* and *ti* are able to increase muscle capacity”.

Yet once radio waves become one with the mental life of a nation, any interruption of the signal would induce a sort of broadcast concussion, “a mental black out over the entire country, a temporary loss of consciousness”. Thus must Radio Khlebnikov be protected, fortified, super-hardened, encased. Peel back the thin skin of the neuro-vibrational zeppelin and you will find a dark control room sunk into cement, signed with a skull and crossbones. That’s how it is in the art and politics of radiophonic space. The *Here comes everybody* is all too often followed in the next breath, by *Danger: Keep Out*.

Such is the enduring challenge for all radio that grows from the grass roots, whether in Oaxaca, or South Africa, or Brooklyn, or Berlin, and this challenge, more political and philosophical than aesthetic, is present from the very first transatlantic radio transmission: the single letter “s”, sent out from the hand of Marconi himself, not as a snake or a snarl, but as a simple Morse code dot dot dot.

Whatever Marconi’s intentions, what do we make of this lonely cipher? Does it mean dot dot dot as in the beginning of save our ship, or is it something salacious, or something sacred?? Or is it the dot dot dot of surrender, or just plain flat out scary? For surely Marconi knew that the same airwaves that might save ships would also, one day, sink them, and that for every ciphered bit of innocence, there would be a smart bomb, or incendiary deception, signifying *execute the plan, eliminate the problem, erase the non-believers*. Might he also have imagined that, many years later, the warm laughter of the Chiapas campesino using a microphone for the first time would eventually cross the big waters and become part of the marathon machete mix at the Hotel Rwanda, where a cool,

calm and eminently radiophonic voice urges the invisible masses to *cut down the tall trees, and to kill the cockroaches, kill the cockroaches?*

After twenty some odd years in and around the world's cacophonous airwaves, I have been there, many times over, inside that inscrutably ambiguous envelope of the simple dot dot dot ... because it turns out that the artist's dream of radio *eros* and the dictator's dream of radio *thanatos* are one and the same, the first being the finger puppet, the second its dancing shadow, or bouncing echo. Or is it the other way around?

Demagogues may well create radio stations to disseminate their monomania, but radio stations may also create demagogues, possibly even from the ranks of those who used to call themselves radio artists, once upon a time, and it is the pure hypnotic power of the beautiful dream, the dream that communication equals community, the dream that everyone is coming, in all races, and all languages, that sets the stage for the power mad despot to do his thing, in a major key.

*Radio eros*, and *radio thanatos*: the two vibrational drives, always present, always in the air, on the loose, saving and sinking, laughter and oblivion, whispers and screams, so humbling in their persistence, and their power. For the broadcast activist and the radio artist, the question is always the same. Can we hear the truth in their seductive and dangerous interplay, and *what do we make of it?*