

LET US FACE THANATOS;
Helen Hahmann and Gregory Whitehead

HH As radiomakers we are part of a local society and we are moved by what is discussed within that society. I plead to think radio from the local, local in the sense of this place, but local also in the sense of a local radio in the village in India. I believe that we can promote a consciousness for the global via radio, which is so important nowadays. Radio can be the point of contact between multiple life realities. Radio has a great potential to be the mediator to break down the walls of „we“ and „the other“.

GW Yes, the utopian aspiration for radio as a space for incubating global community has deep lungs behind it, and let's not forget that early amateur telegraphic radiophonists understood themselves as participants in a vast network of maritime safety and rescue. That said, the same finger that responds to an SOS can also tap out a command to attack, and though of course we want to sustain the utopian aspiration, and breathe life into it, we must remain mindful of the darker vibrations as well. Radio may sing that beautiful siren song, and then suddenly, the ship is on the rocks, and the crew drowned. For me, the tension between the two drives — sometimes I have described them in terms of Eros and Thanatos — is at the very heart of radio art.

HH Let us face Thanatos. I envision Thanatos in its extreme form in the tremendous power exposed by radio stations enlivening violence until genocide in Rwanda and Serbia. The force that delivers suppression and harassment, that feigns and manipulates. But I also see his image in (community) radios, that are constantly busy facing and holding against this destructive force: when discussing for hours how it happened that a misogynic rap song was put on air and commented as a joke (1); when revealing morning by morning cases of domestic violence in a nicaraguan village through the airwaves – life-threatening for the women in front of the microphone (2); when speaking out on air without consciously reflecting the sub-message words also transport (3). All this incidents are part of communities we live in. Local. Concrete. Just on the edge to the „dark vibrations“. Confusing though, Thanatos isn't crawling through the radio as the dark and creepy acoustic figure. It is radioartists who snatch off his mask, so that we also can hear him behind all that feeling-good-easy-listening-rubbish.

GW Early manifestos for radio art embrace and even celebrate the two pulses, the one that connects listeners and the other that obliterates. In 1921, Khlebnikov proposed radio as the “spiritual sun” of the motherland, a sun that would radiate songs of “lightning birds”. Radio sorcerers would mesmerize national consciousness, capable of healing the sick and increasing worker productivity, with Khlebnikov making the strange assertion that the notes “la” and “ti” had the power to expand muscle capacity. On the mask of Thanatos: absolutely true that the most ominous signals arrive in numb, flat wave forms. In the US, possibly the most ominous being the flat-line drone tone of the Emergency Broadcast System, centralized in 1951 through a program with the typically garbled bureaucratic acronym CONELRAD, what unravels as Control of Electromagnetic Radiation. In the event of a nuclear attack, the plan dictated that FM

stations go silent, with AM stations passing emergency announcements one to the next, all to confuse bombers and other lightning birds.

The pulse of Radio Eros — dispersed, elusive, polyphonous — remains a constant threat to centralized power precisely because it defies the permanence of emergency, the embedded drone tone that flatlines the open air. Philosopher Santiago Zabala refers to Hölderlin's wonderful lines, "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/Das Rettende auch" to promote works of art where audiences become responsible "for an emergency that is absent because of the very danger it implies." This was the thinking behind my broadcast *On the Shore Dimly Seen*, singing my way through the dark, into the saving power.

HH Someone gasps for air. A stertorous breathing. The burden of your orchestration of the interrogation log of detainee 063 in Guantanamo marks the emergency so definitely. Torture. Stertorous screaming. A grueling (zermürend) radiophonic space. Extending your approach of polyphonous, fragile and tentative sound to bring threat into consciousness, I'd like to contemplate a special kind of polyphony: the polyphony in community radios. I remember the encounter with a Russian engineer living in Halle, who said that he is a big radio fan and for this reason regularly skipped through the FM radio spectrum in Halle when he arrived to the city. Without knowing that there was a community radio broadcasting in 95.9 FM, he stopped for various times right there, captured and enchanted by the distinguished sound in comparison to all other stations: a conversation in Arabic; someone reading a poem through the telephone; a sound journey through the city, from the perspective of a toad; though a majority still is so irritated by that different way to listen, that it judges this radiophonic proposal(s) questioning its „professionalism“, and in consequence disclaiming it. Although luckily we don't need to please everybody.

GW Pleasing everybody can only be achieved by finding a lowest common denominator, and "lowest" implies airless, stiff, death itself. Radio invites us into a space of intoxicating bewilderment, calling for us to enter the wilds of vibrational disorientation, find our bearings, figure out where we are and who we are, rocked and rolled by the riptides. For my blood, the most invigorating radiocasts embrace the murky, slippery nature of the space in all its terrifying beauty, and refuse cheap "clarity" or "resolution" of the sort one hears with mind-numbing regularity on mainstream frequencies. Listeners such as the Russian engineer, in tune with the medium, embrace the infinite expanse of meaningful chaos where all sorts of sounds and ideas, at odds with each other, may nonetheless find themselves on the same dial. Radio thrives on inchoate improvisation, drop-ins, accidents, insomnia, passion and the unspeakable. Some may find that kind of mix "unprofessional". To my ears, such a rich, sloppy and tangled swamp creates more life than the tight and tidy modules of the mainstream, with the smarmy patronizing hosts, and the coy predictable segues, and the simple-minded enslavement of sound where "moo" always means "cow"!

HH The conference in Halle expounded this discussion about the poetics and politics of transmission. In one panel Rodrigo Ríos picked up an approach that understands

„noise as a carrier of coded signals“. He wonders, if going back to this way of transmission, might there be a possibility to reach the people with information, which so often stay unheard and can't get through. „Maybe the radio of future will be going back to this idea of resistance.“ Following him Anna Friz analyses, „what we have been talking about here is a sort of a representation versus metamorphosis. Does the radio represent a listenership, an approach, a format? Or is it possible for a medium to be a medium of metamorphosis, a place where something is transformed, something changes? I firmly believe that the story of radio is not closed. We don't know the limits of the medium!“ You responded to that saying, „I want to think that radio remains the medium of individual rejection. Rejection. Rebellion. Just negation. Not going there. Not going to participate. Instead, here is this other weight of the way. The medium that can show another weight of the way.”

GW Yes, that phrase “another weight of the way” descends from the voice of Sun Ra, a vibrational being born from intimate contact with an alien radio, a being in touch with infinite otherness, the otherness of outer space, and all its unfolding sense of limitless possibility, a space of freedom; also a space of entropy and interference, everywhere present in the music of Sun Ra. Traveling to that space of freedom begins in resistance —- rejecting the dominant path, where we learn “to be realistic” and “to deliver the goods”. We live in a time, as Gunther Anders proposed several decades ago, of inverted utopianism: instead of being unable to make the things we imagine, we are unable to imagine the implications of the things that we make. We are way too passive in accepting whatever comes down the tubes, whether artificial intelligence; toxic data-mining and surveillance media such as Twitter and Facebook; digital radio as somehow “superior” to analog; CD as “superior” to vinyl, and on and on. In search of a poetics of resistance I think of radiomakers like Anna Friz and her coded telepathies; the blistering vocal interventions of Meira Asher; Karinne Keithley's Basement Tapes of the Mole Cabal; the waves of anonymous free-wheeling pirates; and “odd outsiders” such as WGXC, Resonance FM and Radio Corax.

HH *The examples you give are strong outbursts from a normative practice. I'm interested to find out why they are so scarce. We have many (although not enough) free and community radio stations in the world, that are not tied to an editorship (Chefredaktion), director or producer. But many programs and many stations stick to the conventional formats: moderation, music, moderation; dpa news, weather forecast, another 4-minute song; 60 minutes, 30 minutes programs but much too seldom unsettling 3 hours 13 minutes. I find the considerations you picked up from Günther Anders helpful to get a notion, why so many radiomakers orientate on formatted radio. Turning it around: Which conditions do radiomakers (including radioartists) need to implement and extend the fresh ideas that are out there, which circumstances are required to storm towards new radiophonic directions? Looking at community media realities, many radiomakers dropped out of the dominant society or bear a living on the edges of it. Persons that don't want to fit to the fixed convictions, that want to dictate what is work, what is „normal“, whom to love, how to look, which language to speak. It's these people shaping the „meaningful chaos“ on the airwaves and they represent our society so much more than anything else.*

GW Ossified formats reflect an ossified imagination. A truthful representation of the world's inherent polyphony — and I am including more than human voices here — requires aesthetic and poetic abundance and diversity. Entrenched formats, with tidy introductions and inevitable resolutions delivered by patronizing and complacent hosts, reproduce a comfortable illusion: alles klar, fürchte dich nicht. Such patterns and cognitive rhythms are easy to slip into, like an old pair of pajamas; then we are all collectively ready to go to sleep! Formats embed distinct ideologies and the heavy weight of convention; when we use them, we let the format do the thinking, willingly sacrificing poetic, imaginative agency. That's why I like to bring Sun Ra and the Brothers Grimm into the mix: Sun Ra's poem that brings to light an arm pushing through the dry, baked earth as a flash of lightning, then transforming into an antenna radiating celestial music; and Grimms' *Das Eigensinnige Kind*, giving voice to the "disobedient" arm that refuses the disciplines and violent punishments of the established order. Given the rampant insanity of our present times, I have my doubts whether the human species will sustain a viable future. Yet if we are brave enough to imagine and create a different way of life, let us tune our ears less to the crunch and bone-rattle of the dry earth, and more to those willful arms, the ones that spark the cosmos!