
Radio Icons, Short Circuits, Deep Schisms

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Radio Icons, Short Circuits, Deep Schisms

Allen S. Weiss

Multiple and contradictory histories of radiophony could be constituted, depending upon both the historical paradigms chosen to guide the research, and the theoretical phantasms behind the investigation. Its prehistory is vast; one key moment may be cited. Rabelais, in the fourth book of *Pantagruel*, describes a seafaring voyage during which the crew hears voices that seem to come from thin air, an effect causing great fear. Pantagruel explains that these sounds consist of words that were frozen in the winter air, and which begin to thaw out upon being touched, thus becoming audible.¹

And we could see sharp words, bloody words (which, according to the pilot, sometimes went back to the place where they'd been spoken, only to find the throat that uttered them had been slit open), horrible words, and many others equally unpleasant to see. And when they'd melted, we heard: *hin, hin, hin, hin, hiss, tick, tock, whizz, gibber, jabber, frr, frrr, frrr, boo, boo, boo, boo, boo, boo, boo, crack, track, trr, trr, trr, trrr, trrrr, on, on, on, wooawooawooooon, gog, magog*, and God only knows what other barbarian words. (Rabelais [1532] 1993:497)

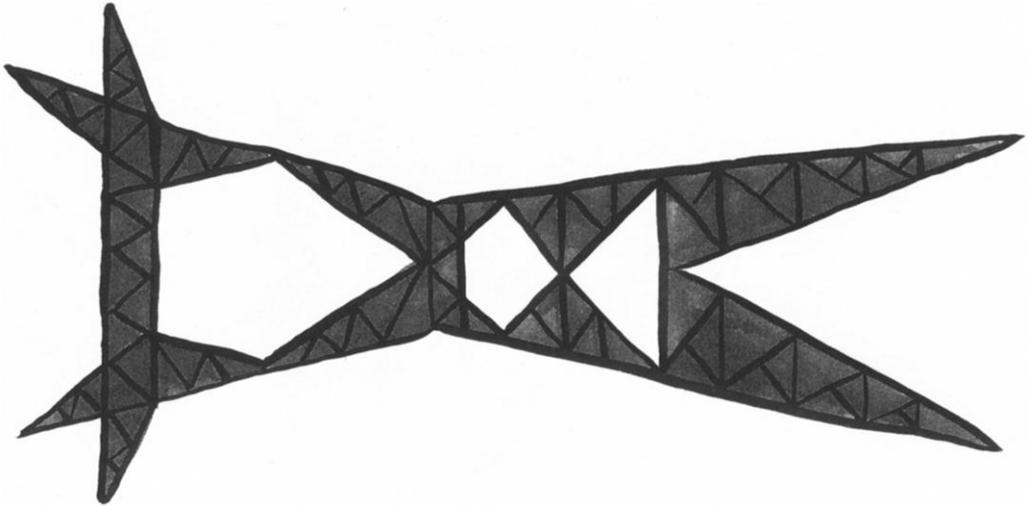
Though his companions wish to preserve some of these words in oil, Pantagruel says that it is not worth saving what is always plentifully at hand. Can we not see in this scenario the phantasm at the origins of radiophonic art, where the word is embalmed and speech immortalized? Only the slit throat, the terminal loss of body, indeed death, permits an eternal return of the voice. This return is situated at the origins of modernism, where the particular characteristics of recorded sound—disembodiment, alienation, repetition, eternalization, temporal malleability, and so forth—simultaneously transform age-old metaphysical and theological paradigms, and offer unheard of formal and practical aesthetic possibilities.

The French playwright Valère Novarina explains the extreme difficulty in reading Rabelais, a difficulty described in terms of a veritable archaeology of the lived, respiratory, muscular, enunciatory patterns of the French language: “To read him is to change bodies; it is an act of respiratory exchange, it is to breathe within another’s body” (1992:75–76). Believing in the interlocutory presence of the lived body, Novarina is a man of the theatre, and he

consequently provides a critique of present-day mainstream radio that might serve as a partial guide for our present concerns:

They work night and day with immense teams and enormous financial means: a cleansing of the body in sound recording, a toilet of the voice, filtering, tapes edited and carefully purified of all laughs, farts, hiccoughs, salivations, respirations, of all the slag that marks the animal, material nature of the words that come from the human body [...]. (1993:100)

He proposes, in its stead, a new use of the voice that harkens back to Antonin Artaud's own transformation of the vocal arts, as manifested in his radiophonic *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1948). Certainly apparent in the productions of Novarina's own theatre, there are indeed also radiophonic works that instantiate this recorporealization of the human voice, all the while achieving a disquieting grafting of mechanical, electric, and electronic possibilities onto the strictly human potentials of sound recording and transmission—an artificial transmogrification of respiratory patterns and vocal intonations.



Artwork by Zaven Paré

There is no single entity that constitutes “radio”; rather, there exists a multitude of radios. Radiophony is a heterogeneous domain, on the levels of its apparatus, its practice, its forms, and its utopias. A brief and necessarily incomplete sketch of some possibilities of nonmainstream concepts of radio will give an idea of this diversity: Rudolf Arnheim—radiophonic specificity and the critique of visual imagination; Bertolt Brecht—interactive radio and public communication; William Burroughs—cut-ups and the destruction of communication; Glenn Gould—studio perfectionism and “contrapuntal radio”; Velimir Khlebnikov—revolutionary utopia and the fusion of mankind; Marshall McLuhan—the primitive extension of the central nervous system; F.T. Marinetti—“wireless imagination” and futurist radio; Upton Sinclair—telepathy and mental radio; Leon Trotsky—revolutionary radio; Dziga Vertov—agit-prop and the “Radio-Eye”; the labyrinthine radio narratives of Hörspiel; the diversity of community radios; free radio; guerilla radio; pirate radio; radical radio...

As such, every “radio” determines an ideal world, though some such domains deal explicitly with the issues of utopia and dystopia, as is evinced in

this volume: Richard Foreman's selection from *Hotel Radio* evokes, as does all his theatrical work, the strangeness at the core of the quotidian; Toni Dove's *Casual Workers, Hallucinations, and Appropriate Ghosts* creates an aural evocation of high-tech street erotics; and Lou Mallozzi's *Lingua Franca*, as well as Kaye Mortley's *Around Naxos*, offer sonorous investigations of the unique relations between topography, history, language, and experience established by audio montage.

The 19th century was the epoch in which new metaphors of transmission and reception, as well as novel modes of the imagination, were conceived. The "animal magnetism" of Mesmerism was replaced in the 19th century by the spiritualist manipulation of electric waves in the ether, destined to merge with the psychic waves of the departed, such that electricity would permit contact with the afterworld. Walt Whitman, already by 1855, announced "I Sing the Body Electric" as one of the poems in *Leaves of Grass*; Charles Cros would link his lyrical, nostalgic love poetry to his discoveries that would fix time and space, the color photograph and sound recording; Villiers de l'Isle-Adam would reconstitute, in the antitechnological backlash of his *L'Ève future*, a key modernist paradigm following cartesian mechanistic philosophy, that of the human as machine. Edison would, of course, realize all these fantasies with his invention and successful marketing of sound recording devices.

At the turn of the 20th century, these new modes of communication, sound production and reproduction were already part of the contemporary psyche: Henry Adams included in his 1907 autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, a chapter entitled "The Virgin and the Dynamo"—nothing better expresses the difference between ancient and modern paradigms of aesthetics and ontology, where the rapidity and excitation of electric power serves as the new symbol of a body now ruled by technology, without divine interference. The virgin/dynamo opposition effectively expresses the different paradigms to be established nearly a quarter of a century later at the interior of radiophonic art. The classic theatre is a stage of history, theology, and metaphysics, of the body given to God and the Virgin, to nature and culture—the body imbued with life-force. The dynamo, to the contrary, is something quite other, creating a new current, flow, circulation, excitation—a force closely allied with the destructive powers of technology. Electricity transformed the very form of the imagination through which we discover our contemporary utopias and dystopias. The first group of essays presented here suggest varied proto-radiophonic phantasms situated at the threshold of this paradigm shift, suggesting a revision of genealogy of the audiophonic arts: In "Stein's Stein," a piece of theoretical fiction, I detail the serendipitous disjunction between thought and enunciation in an experimental practice that served as a model for the early avantgarde; Alexandra Keller's "Shards of Voice" exhibits the perverse, variegated, and intertwining phantasies concerning voices and heads, talking and otherwise; both Mark Roberts' "Wired: Schreber as Machine, Technophobe, and Virtualist" and Christof Migone's "HeadHole" add to a growing literature on the aesthetic implications of psychopathological symptoms and syndromes. These essays help chart the psychological and sociological transformations of the role of the voice within the European symbolic system at the moment of the invention and dissemination of sound recording, changes which imply a radical epistemological shift in the constitution of memory, temporality, and knowledge.

To continue this skeletal history, bringing radiophony into high modernism, the date 2 February 1948 is crucial. This is the moment of the nonevent that remains pivotal in radiophony, the suppression of Antonin Artaud's scheduled radio broadcast of *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*. This year also marks the origin of modern radiophonic and electroacoustic research and



creativity, for it was at this moment that magnetic recording tape was perfected and became available for artistic purposes. The confluence of these two events—Artaud’s final attempt to void his interiority, to transform psyche and suffering and body into art; and the technical innovation of recording tape, which henceforth permitted the experimental aesthetic simulation and disarticulation of voice as pure exteriority—established a major epistemological-aesthetic shift in the history of art.

Though the radiophonic voice is “disembodied,” the body is never totally absent from radio, while it is often radically disfigured, transformed, mutated. The body is neither purely natural nor purely textual, but rather the primal symbolic system that articulates nature and culture. As transformed by the re-recording, looping, and feedback capabilities of sound engineering (especially given the subliminal, microphonic levels of digital sampling), the human voice in radiophonic art (and, by extension, in certain extreme examples of experimental cinema) will project the voice of “nobody,” which like Artaud’s “body without organs,” from his radiophonic *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, is proposed as an antidote to the ills that beset the fragile, tortured body in pain. We must therefore rethink the radio in terms of a potentially disarticulatory—and no longer articulatory—site of the symbolic, not representing the body but rather transforming or annihilating it.

Several of the works presented here speak to these issues: Ellen Zweig’s “Mendicant Erotics” is a narrative of aleatory relations between erotic encounter and geographic location, suggesting an allegory for constituting a libidinal radio space; John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis’s “Aural Sex: The Female Orgasm in Popular Sound” charts out a theory of gender difference in relation to broadcast musical voices, while Mary Louise Hill’s “Developing *A Blind Understanding*” offers a parallel analysis, from the point of view of semiotics, dealing with the constitution of gender difference in narrative radio; and both previously mentioned texts by Toni Dove and Alexandra Keller set forth eroticized phantasms aligned with the formal properties of radiophony, while Mark Roberts’ analysis of Schreber’s psychosis reveals the underlying connections between eroticism and theology, in a delirium where the epochal shift from mechanics to electronics is already seen to be inscribed in the unconscious.

Certain radical experiments in radiophony, those of concern to us here, suggest the broad potential of radio beyond the various stultifying “laws” that guide mainstream radio: the law of maximal inoffensiveness, the law of maximal indifference, the law of maximal financial return. A sort of perverse specialization—perhaps a manifestation of what Gilles Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* speaks of as a “logic of the particular”—reigns in certain contemporary pirate radio stations, which determines the margins of aesthetic culture. These experimental possibilities may operate at the very interior of mainstream, government, military, or commercial radio, rare as they may be: parasites and viruses which determine yet other limits, functions, and pleasures of radiophonic art.

Every new medium first contains and disseminates the forms and content of past media, well before ever revealing its own aesthetic potential. Radio was no exception, and present history has barely changed the situation. In his novel *Les larmes de pierre* (Tears of Stone), Eugène Nicole recounts a charmingly naive phantasm of the radio. The narrator, speaking of his childhood years on the French island of Saint-Pierre during the 1940s, recounts the following:

Maryse and I now know that the announcer didn’t live in the radio. For a long time, at Jacquet’s place, we imagined that the radio’s interior was arranged like a miniature apartment where, at the same hour each evening, seated on a sofa, after having placed a record on the gramo-

phone, Pointe-Fine spoke to us [...]. We readily admitted that *in the radio*—like in our doll-houses and our cardboard farms, which always had one wall missing, so that we could serve the children’s refreshments, or put animals inside, stuck into the gaps by little wooden pegs—there reigned a different scale of peculiar realities. It was more difficult, however, to understand how that big asparagus Pointe-Fine, with his basque beret and his too-long raincoat, was to be found a half-hour later, not only in our radio, but in all the radios of the city. “The mystery of the Eucharist,” exclaimed The Old Woman, raising her eyes to the heavens to underline our ignorance, or to ask pardon of God for this blasphemous parallel, which didn’t hinder her from adding, “Like the body of Jesus, while present in each host, is in all the others at the same time.” (Nicole 1991:22–25)

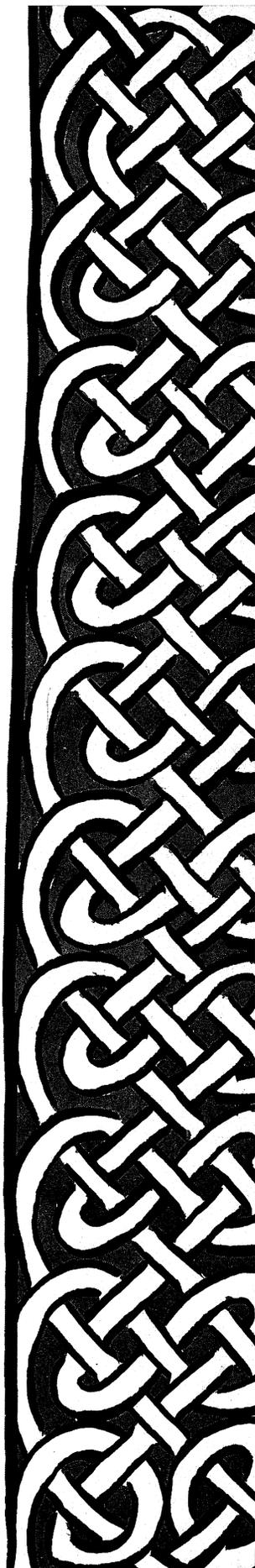
What is at stake is not merely imagination as remembrance, as the reproduction of what already exists, but rather imagination as creative act. Radio is the ideal medium to establish such a poetics and ethics, given its infinite overture to imaginative conjecture and visual discord. Yet seldom is such aesthetic openness manifested or even encouraged in modern media; ironically, mainstream radio uses all of its efforts to deny this poetic source of creativity by restricting radio to old musical and theatrical conventions, by remaining a “clean” medium.

However sophisticated the montage, most works for radio never surpass the conditions of music, theatre, and poetry—radio rarely realizes the potentials specific to the radiophonic apparatus. For radiophony is not only a matter of audiophonic invention, but also of sound diffusion and listener circuits or feedback. Whence the paradox of radio: a universally public transmission is heard in the most private of circumstances; the thematic specificity of each individual broadcast, its imaginary scenario, is heard within an infinitely diverse set of nonspecific situations, different for each listener; despite radio auditors’ putative solidarity, they remain atomized, and the imagination is continually reified. “La Vieille” is correct: the experience of radio is indeed mystifying, though on a far more mundane level than her analogy would suggest.

In contrast with Eugène Nicole’s charming childhood fantasy of radio, consider the following description by the contemporary radio artist, Gregory Whitehead, from “Radio Art Le Mómo”:

Radio Talking Drum—an utopian transposition that loves to forget. *Most* forgotten are the lethal wires that still heat up from inside out, wires that connect radio with warfare, brain damage, rattles from necropolis. When I turn my radio on, I hear a whole chorus of death rattles: from stone cold, hard fact larynxes frozen at every stage of physical decomposition; from talk show golden throats cut with a scalpel, transected, then taped back together and beamed out across the airwaves; from voices that have been severed from the body for so long that no one can remember who they belong to, or whether they belong to anybody at all; from pop monster giggle-bodies guaranteed to shake yo’ booty; from artificial folds sneak-stitched into still-living throats through computer synthesis and digital processing; from mechanical chatter-boxes dead to begin with; from cyberphonic anti-bodies taking flight and crashing to pieces on air. (1991:145)

The man-in-the-radio is countered by the radio-in-the-man. Like Nicole, Whitehead recognizes radio’s intimate coupling with sundry nostalgias and forms of death—radio as an electronic memento mori for a modern age and a thoughtless public. It is in regard to these new creative possibilities that the





core of this issue of *TDR* lies, precisely in those texts which deal specifically with questions of the ontological and aesthetic specificity of radiophonic montage: Susan Stone's "Cat's Cradle," René Farabet's "From One Head to Another," Joe Milutis's "Radiophonic Ontologies and the Avantgarde," Douglas Kahn's "Three Receivers," Dwight Frizzell and Jay Mandeville's "Inaudible Postscript," and Gregory Whitehead's conversation with Jérôme Noetinger, entitled "Radio Play Is No Place."

This issue of *TDR* was conceived to play a certain role in the current dialog about radio. Considerations of mainstream radio have been for the most part excluded from aesthetic and cultural discourse, and the history of experimental radiophony has until recently been utterly repressed. At this moment that academic recognition is belatedly occurring, we offer the present project as an attempt to complicate such matters. Thus, in this special issue of *TDR*, we are concerned with conditions of transmission, circuits, disarticulation, degeneration, metamorphosis, mutation—and not communication, closure, articulation, representation, and simulacra. As the inevitable canonization of the field transpires, we wish to keep its margins fluid. Whence the concern with the occasionally incompatible yet increasingly crucial domains of ontological heterogeneity, disjointed signifiers, broken circuits, dead air, disembodied voices, audio uncanny, linguistic contortions, noise, and spiritualist macabre. The range of these essays—offering but a selection of the vast array of topics currently being explored—should make clear that radio is not merely a communications conduit, but rather a heterogeneous mix of technological progress and aestheticized desire, intermedia mixes and societal restrictions, broadcast possibilities and suppressed histories.

This collection of essays ends on an iconoclastic note, G.X. Juppiter-Larsen's "More Facts on the Polywave," for radiophony is the iconoclastic, or at least iconophobic, art form par excellence. Shattered icons create radical schisms which establish new circuits. I might conclude this introduction in an analogous manner, by repeating a joke remembered from my childhood. Both heard on the radio and referring to the radio, the following minimal dialog generated mysteries that incited my earliest reflections on radiophony:

Two elephants are sitting in a bathtub. One elephant says to the other, "Please pass the soap." The other elephant responds, "No soap, radio."

Nonsense!? I now await, in response, other narratives, other paradoxes, other noises and silences.

Note

1. This introduction is in part derived from two of my earlier texts: "Broken Voices, Lost Bodies" in *Perverse Desire and the Ambiguous Icon* (1994); and "Radio Phantasms, Phantasmic Radio," in *Phantasmic Radio* (1995).

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