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British Radio Dramaturgy and the Effects of the New Conservatism

This essay, which is informed by the author's own practice as a playwright working in the medium of radio drama, looks at some effects of the enforced merger of radio with TV drama to create a 'bi-media' department at the BBC, and considers the evolution of commissioning policy since the imposition of the internal market under the Director Generalship of John Birt (from 1992 to 2000). Considering radio drama, after Adorno, as a producer in the culture industry, he suggests that the neo-conservatism of the 1980s, as described by Habermas, is a significant factor in understanding current commissioning practices and the dramaturgy of new realism in some radio drama. William Stanton is a Lecturer in Drama at Exeter University, where he teaches and researches writing for performance and intercultural performance practice through a research/practice link with the University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil, where he has an AHRB award for a new project in 2004. He is also a writer of fiction and plays for stage and radio. His most recent play for BBC Radio 4 was *Dead Line* in 2002, and his *Route 23* is forthcoming.

IN 1971, Martin Esslin, who was then head of BBC radio drama, wrote in the first volume of *Theatre Quarterly* 'The Mind as a Stage', in which he described the function and scope of the medium. Discussing the diverse work of the national theatre of the air, he reminded us that a Saturday Night Theatre production (normally 90 minutes), repeated the following Monday afternoon, reached 'an audience of between one and a half and two million people – the equivalent, that is, of a run of between 1,500 and 2,000 sold-out performances in a theatre holding a thousand people – a run of more than five years!' (1971, p. 6).

But radio drama's reach was far broader than this: the audience for a Radio 3 'minority drama . . . may be no larger than 50,000 people for a single performance, still the equivalent of a respectable run in a small theatre, but far too small to be considered commercial in television' (1971, p. 7). The scope of the medium, then broadcasting 500 to 700 radio plays a year, was huge; and the variety of the work, in terms of new writing and production, was a mark not only of the flexibility and power of the medium, but also of its organization.

The radio drama script unit functioned like the literary department of many national

theatre companies, acting as both receiver and initial 'filter' for the hundreds of scripts submitted by known and unknown writers each month. All of these were commented on by teams of readers, and those writers who showed some potential for the medium were helped to develop their craft in a dialogue with script editors and producers – 'a veritable university of dramatic writing', as Esslin put it. He was rightly proud of the BBC's commitment to both new and established writing, and the dramaturgical credentials of the system – particularly in commissioning, and in script and writer development – were impressive.

Citing John Arden, Harold Pinter, Giles Cooper, Willis Hall, Henry Livings, Tom Stoppard, and many others, Esslin emphasized the importance of the partnership over the first fifty years of radio drama between writer, dramaturg, and director in bringing significant new writing to the public. But because it was a national theatre, BBC radio drama broadcast a diversity of work in translation – part of a policy for 'each generation growing up to hear the bulk of classical drama, from the Greek tragedians and Aristophanes to the Elizabethans, Restoration comedy, the nineteenth-century realists, Ibsen, Chekhov,

Strindberg, Shaw, right down to Brecht and Beckett' (1971, p. 6).

Such scope was also possible because the medium was and remains able to mount productions far more cheaply than the theatre or television. A 90-minute radio play with a large cast could be (and still is) recorded in a week, with a further two or three days of editing; and we may see this, among other things, as a highly cost-effective form of subsidy. The medium was broad and flexible and its ability to develop scripts and therefore writers was a mark of the clearly defined dramaturgical function of the script unit.

Esslin wrote his article over thirty years ago, and celebrated in particular the development of radio drama from the 1950s. His somewhat utopian picture did not mention censorship, however – the fact that the Lord Chamberlain's office had full control of the licensing of stage plays for public performance until 1968. This, inevitably, must have had its effect at the BBC. As Steve Nicholson points out (citing a speech by the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to Lord Reith and the retiring directors of the BBC in 1926), 'in understanding the role of censorship, what is allowed – and by definition encouraged – is as important as what is banned' (2003, p. 291).

Baldwin's speech had been about white supremacy, and we should remember that his attitudes are those of the leader of an imperial power looking down on native populations. He was also addressing a BBC Director General who had seen it as his duty to put the Corporation at the disposal of the government in its propaganda war against the General Strike (by the inferior native population at home) in that same year.

It is important to note that the crucial underlying theme in Nicholson's detailed documentation of censorship is that, when dealing with powerful institutions, people learn to produce – and to write – what they think is likely to 'get through'. In other words, they learn to operate forms of self-censorship that are invisible and of course extremely difficult to quantify. This, for instance, comes into relief at the BBC World Service, which is funded not by the licence fee but directly by the Foreign and Com-

monwealth Office. Independence, just as the notion of public service, may sometimes be problematic in this context, even though World Service producers believe in their editorial freedom.

Frankfurt Dystopia 1

Theodor Adorno's tirades against the workings and effects of culture as part of industry, particularly in his book *The Culture Industry* (1991), are directed at culture throughout the modernist period, particularly regarding ways in which modernist work has become incorporated by late capitalism. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and latterly Jürgen Habermas have argued that incorporation is not just a matter of ways in which cultural products are determined by markets, but of a fundamental change in aesthetics. Late-capitalist evolution, according to this theory, results in the erosion of modernist two-dimensionality; and the Frankfurt school has produced a complex, far-reaching, and (for some) controversial critical discourse on the ways in which this process works.

This raises questions about what art can achieve; whether Marcuse is right to characterize the development of late capitalism as producing one-dimensionality (1968); and, indeed, whether resistance to the process is possible. This in our present context raises the question of whether it is possible for radio drama to sustain in any way some sort of liberal-conservative accommodation between a broad notion of public service broadcasting and the demands of markets.

According to Martin Esslin, BBC radio drama once went its independent way, providing high quality and diverse radio theatre for large audiences. He does not provide the sort of socio-economic profiling that the BBC now gathers, and this is significant partly because profiling was not accorded such significance then. We feel that Esslin and his colleagues knew both their existing audiences and also those they wanted to encourage; and the tenor of his article suggests that he might have held, in response to the Frankfurt critique, that the public service function of radio drama, with its commit-

ment to drama from Aeschylus to the present, was resistant to a Marcusian one-dimensionality precisely because of its variety of genres and its policy of developing new work that did not necessarily accord with 'house style'.

Effects of a 'Market Economy'

The first major change in John Birt's period as Director General of the BBC (1992–2000) was to establish an internal market. In radio, the script unit was disbanded and replaced by a system called 'producer choice', by which producers needed to 'sell' projects to commissioning editors, who would decide what kinds of drama would be made in each commissioning 'round', of which there were, and still are, two a year. The resulting backlog of scripts and ideas was swollen by a cutback in the number of drama 'slots' in the schedules of Radios 3 and 4.

A new management culture – with its layer of managers whose function was to manage the managers – was funded from a budget hitherto spent on production work; and this brought sweeping staff as well as policy changes. After this 'year zero', radio drama became part of a 'bi-media' department with TV, which meant in effect that cash was moved from radio to TV production – from what was seen as small-scale and minority work in radio to the large-scale and popular medium of TV, with its ever-increasing production costs and new imperatives to take primary account of audience ratings.

The result was staff as well as resource reductions in radio. The internal market decreed initially that 10 per cent – though this rose to 25 per cent – of all drama production would be commissioned from independent companies – many of them set up by BBC production staff who had been laid off. The BBC's own recording studios (and even the huge reference library at the World Service) had to be 'hired' by BBC drama producers – with the result, for instance, that the excellent studio facilities at Maida Vale became so costly that BBC producers began to record plays at independent studios, leaving prime resources standing empty.

The drive of the market impacted on radio commissioning policy, too. Without a script unit, and with a new tier of commissioning editors working to Kate Rowland, the new head of radio drama, who worked to James Boyle, head of Radio 4, who was appointed by John Birt, commissioning policy became a more opaque process, at least from the writer's point of view – and in my experience, for many producers too. Early on, the 90-minute play, which until then had held three slots on Radio 4 per week, was decreed dead.

It was difficult to determine the cause of death, but the evidence of focus groups and other (unavailable) audience research seems to have been a significant factor. It was stated, in internal memoranda and meetings with producers, that audiences didn't want to listen to plays of that length; that their attention span wasn't up to it. We may wonder what had happened to Martin Esslin's one-and-a-half to two million listeners.

Increasing preoccupation by managers with audience figures has now resulted in more reliance on demographic profiling by the BBC's Audience and Consumer Research Department, with a view to making programmes for targeted audiences. The BBC's publicly available information, based on data gather by Radio Joint Audience Research Ltd (RAJAR), a company jointly owned by the BBC and the Commercial Radio Companies Association, gives listening figures and audience 'reach' for every radio station. The BBC's own (unavailable) data provide breakdowns of listening figures derived from RAJAR data per programme slot, and from this audience profiles are generated.

BBC Information (BBCi) maintains a website called Writersroom that is a latter-day substitute for the radio script department – though it is a bi-media site, with the inevitable emphasis on TV. It contains information for would-be writers about commissioning for radio and TV, but does not disclose the BBC's own detailed audience profiles for each slot. Profiles and commissioning briefs, are, however, available through two other organizations: Writing.org, an organization which publishes BBC profiles on its own

website, and Writernet.org, which contains a lot of general information and contacts. From all this information we can see that, in a culture which is devoted to marketing product that meets perceived existing audience tastes, the market will determine artistic policy.

Frankfurt Dystopia 2

Walter Benjamin's 1936 discussion of the end of the auratic work in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1973) developed the idea that the emerging mass culture in Europe would harness the assault of the avant-garde on bourgeois culture in a process of social transformation. This would be marked by desublimation of art (the end of aura) coupled with the aestheticization of life through a break with bourgeois culture and its forms. New forms would develop, signalled by the mass-reproducibility inherent in montage, photography, and the movie; by the kind of critically-aware audience he and Bertolt Brecht hoped for in the development of a new kind of epic; and by the aesthetic transformation he believed would flow from the 'profane illumination' (1997, p. 227) of French surrealism.

But this for the Frankfurt school constitutes a problematic in critical theory, precisely because desublimation eliminates the older, high art of modernism which embodied a dialectic of representation. The modernist work, with its roots in the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century, was, in Marcuse's view, 'the expression of that free and conscious alienation from the established forms of life with which literature and the arts opposed those forms even where they adorned them' (1968, p. 60). The Frankfurt school critique argues that advancing capitalism in Europe has incorporated and flattened cultural activity and its products, always eroding that which is transcendent in art; that which refuses to conform, to behave itself; that which expresses subjectivity.

Two-dimensionality, or the dialectic in which art could simultaneously provide a critique and was yet compromised both by its own mimesis and its existence as commodity (exchange-value), is the mark of the

modernist work. As Marcuse puts it: 'Artistic alienation is sublimation. It creates the images of conditions which are irreconcilable with the established Reality Principle but which, as cultural images, become tolerable, even edifying and useful' (1968, p. 69). And as Adorno argued, noting the incapability of psychoanalysis to explain art, 'If art has psychoanalytic roots, then they are the roots of fantasy in the fantasy of omnipotence. This fantasy includes the wish to bring about a better world' (1997a, p. 9). One-dimensionality, it is argued, produces anodyne, soporific, gutless art that increasingly functions in the culture industry as product, is marked by its exchange value, and thus becomes incorporated into the entertainment industry.

The critique of this process, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997b), written in the shocked aftermath of German fascism, needs to understand the development of capitalism, and how it was that the philosophical trajectory of the Enlightenment could produce Nazi Germany. Frankfurt school aesthetics, attempting to engage with this massive task, focuses on ways in which the same desublimation welcomed by Walter Benjamin is leading to a mass culture of contentment and acceptance, liquidating the ability of the high art of modernism to transgress and indict.

Writing about architecture, Jürgen Habermas suggests that modernism 'is the only architectural movement to have sprung from the spirit of the avant-garde, the only one equal to the avant-garde painting, music, and literature of our century' (1994, p. 8). Desublimation, or the destruction of modernism, turns cultural activity into a kind of sampling, dislocated from historical context and social reference, not to mention a dissent that runs deeper and much further back than, for example, the Dadaists' desire for anti-bourgeois outrage.

I also note, on the point of considering the new conservatism of the postmodern, that the idea of the 'closing of the universe of discourse', as Marcuse held (1968, p. 77 ff.), is the inescapably totalizing condition of contemporary society, leading not only to one-

dimensionality but also to the increasing difficulty of saying anything that will exert an uncontaminated critical purchase on contemporary reality. This view gives rise to a pessimism that a political praxis is useless because it is already vitiated by capitalist hegemony. This can be seen at work in post-modernist thinking, behind proclamations of the end of history, metaphysics and therefore subjectivity and the escape into the endless recession of meaning, the replacement of praxis with the play of the signifier and games of *jouissance*, irony, and reflexivity (even though the subject of the enunciation has been proclaimed forever absent).

Two further important arguments should be noted at this juncture. The first is Edward Said's view that 'Frankfurt school critical theory, despite its seminal insights into the relationship between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through art as critique, is stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, oppositional practice in the empire' (1994, p. 336). The second is that preoccupations with a Eurocentric critique – in particular the problematic of the Enlightenment and German fascism – has, as Terry Eagleton argues, led Adorno 'and other members of the Frankfurt school to travesty and misrecognize some of the specific power-structures of liberal capitalism' (1990, p. 359).

Aftermath of Year Zero at the BBC

We might observe at this point that systemic change, introduced by fiat and in short order, precipitates conflict. It may be that John Birt was acting in the way recommended by Machiavelli when he wrote in 1514 that a new prince, having seized a state, should inflict all the injuries that are needed 'once for all, and not have to renew them every day, and in that way he will be able to set men's minds at rest and win them over to him when he confers benefits' (1981, p. 66).

Resistance to new policies from BBC staff, writers, and audiences was claimed by conservative supporters of market forces to be the result of institutional opposition to radical change. Here was an ideological knot: in a

reactionary political climate proclaiming the end of society and absolute freedom for monetarism and supply-side economics, BBC producers and editors most committed to a liberal tradition of independence and public service were characterized as both left-wing *and* reactionary.

In developing this perspective, I should also declare my interest as a radio playwright, and confirm that as a result my memory is selective and constituted by the halting progress of a number of projects during this period. But in the absence of a detailed 'official' documentation of change, a narrative of this kind is likely to be, in part at least, anecdotal, in the same way as is the self-censorship I referred to above. For instance, I can remember a discussion about a project I was developing, and how as we walked away from Broadcasting House to find a quiet corner in a bar, I was told that the massive building works taking place were part of a policy to turn Broadcasting House into the BBC's corporate HQ, and that BBC news and radio drama would both be moved out. This subsequently happened, with news going to White City and Drama going to Bush House.

In the same conversation, I was told that the huge decline in audience numbers following the radio drama schedule changes could not be fully discussed in meetings; and moreover there was a growing sense of anger and alienation among many writers, on whom the medium absolutely depended. I was of course glad to hear this: it gave a measure of support to my sense of isolation and perplexity – and, as any writer will recognize, a sense that incipient paranoia wasn't entirely illusory.

Without doubt, the changes to commissioning policy and budgets resulted in conflicting narratives of change, of what was to be allowed and why, of the obscure provenance of policy in the experience of producers and writers. But even a large corporation, propelled by a conservative management culture and market economics, is not completely deaf to the murmuring in its corridors (as Machiavelli also noted), let alone letters of protest from listeners and writers.

New guidelines were produced for writers and briefings given for their agents. Not long after my gloomy discussion about the uncertain future of radio drama, I was invited to a well-lubricated reception for radio writers in a fine early-Victorian house in Soho at which Kate Rowland, as head of radio drama, extolled the benefits of the commissioning policy and the challenges of the new radio drama slots. And not long after that, the project I had been paid to develop was summarily cancelled, with the question raised by a commissioning editor as to the wisdom of its having been commissioned in the first place.

Such anecdotes abound in the world of writing for radio and TV, with some major projects (like *Our Friends in the North* and *The Falklands Play*) invested in, inexplicably cancelled and subsequently re-commissioned. I also note that, with the arrival of Greg Dyke, the policy to turn Broadcasting House into the BBC's corporate HQ has been reversed, and the latest policy is that, following the rebuilding works, radio drama and World Service will be relocated to Broadcasting House when the BBC's lease on Bush House expires.

A New Institutional Policy for Radio Drama

The new policy at Radio 4 introduced the twice-yearly commissioning of 45-minute Afternoon Plays, a 60-minute Friday Play in the evening, a Saturday Play of 60 minutes in the afternoon, and the Sunday afternoon 60-minute Classic Serial. This constituted a very large cut in the BBC's output of radio drama since Martin Esslin's day. BBC commissioning editors might disagree, pointing to the variety of output on Radio 4 which, with a certain amount of categorial license, could be called drama. It includes part-dramatized readings (15 minutes, three or four each week-day), comedy drama (30 minutes, some week-day mornings and sometimes at 11.30 p.m.), *The Archers* (15-minute soap opera, Monday to Friday at 7.00 p.m., repeated at 2.00 p.m. the following day, with a 75-minute omnibus on Sunday morning, and then at 7.00 p.m. on Sunday), a half-hour comedy slot at 6.30 p.m. and *Book of the Week* at 12.30 a.m. The policy

for Radio 3 left a 70- to 120-minute play at 6.30 on Sunday evening, either a known classic, a newly commissioned work, or a 'tie-in' with a theatre production; and also the occasional commissioning of 60- to 75-minute plays in a new slot called *The Wire*.

However much we might want to discuss with commissioning editors what constitutes drama, it is the case that, since the restructuring of the 1990s, a new institutional attitude to radio drama has gradually developed. This has continued since the departure of John Birt in 2000 and the succession as Director General of Greg Dyke, whose policies of dismantling Birt's extra layers of management and restoring money to production have been met with relief – but also a sense of waste that so much resource was taken from production in the first place.

New controllers and heads of department have been appointed, including Helen Boaden at Radio 4 and Gordon House in radio drama, where Kate Rowland has become the commissioning editor for the Friday Play and *The Wire*. Now policy is changing again, though it is unlikely that funding diverted to TV production will be restored, and the 2.5 per cent increase in the 2003 budget for radio drama, set against negotiated increases of 3.5 per cent for writers and actors, results in a cut of one per cent for production. Nevertheless, Radio 4 is seeing a resurrection of occasional plays longer than 60 minutes – as for instance the recent three-part adaptation of Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* (2003) at 150 minutes per episode.

But this demonstrates that commissioning policy for drama is as much market-oriented as before – perhaps more so, given the new Director General's background in the competitive markets of commercially funded TV. Much Radio 4 policy still seems to derive principally from managerial decisions about the market rather than being developed by programme-makers – that is, as collaborations between dramaturgs, script editors, producers, and writers. Radio 3, in contrast, continues to produce drama of very high quality and diversity in its reduced slots, which may be in part because it is seen as a small haven for 'serious' work. It would be

wrong, however, to point to this work and claim that the BBC continues to produce radio drama in the way Esslin described thirty years ago.

Frankfurt Dystopia 3

Russell Berman, discussing Frankfurt school aesthetics, argues that, 'The modernist work locates itself along a diachronic axis through an immanent critique of tradition, thereby describing an emphatic present counterposed to a rejected past' (1984, p. 44). But, as he goes on to say, the postmodernist announcement of the end of history has resulted in a new aesthetics in which, for example, 'the aesthetic debris of the past (which is no longer a past opposed to the present) reappears as immediately accessible in the historicist eclecticism of postmodernist architectural referentiality' (1984, p. 44).

But it is not only architecture that has suffered from an ahistorical eclecticism which (we are told) we should find at least witty, if not ironic, in its decoupled referencing of the past. Berman's argument, congruently with Frankfurt school thought, is that there is a profoundly troubling aspect of desublimation, namely the aestheticization of life; and that this has a tendency towards superficiality, trivialization, and a worrying narcissism whose lack of foundations make society vulnerable to reactionary nationalism.

The critical void left by the loss of the two-dimensional, in the discourses of art as well as life, draws in the easy compensations of short-term gratification, self-obsession, and nationalistic aggression. And yet, departing from the Frankfurt perspective (or perhaps updating it in the light of developments since Adorno's death in 1969), Berman finds plenty to be concerned about in the aggressivity and violence of contemporary culture. This, he suggests, is a result of a wholesale cultural denaturing: not only the erosion of modernism's two-dimensionality, but also the loss of its contrary – the avant-garde – for which many intellectuals of the left had had high hopes since before Walter Benjamin.

Writing in 1929, Benjamin had made the claim that: 'It is as magical experiments with

words, not as artistic dabbling, that we must understand the passionate phonetic and graphical transformational games that have run through the whole literature of the avant-garde for the past fifteen years, whether it is called Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism' (1997, p. 232). It seems that his hope was that work of this kind would lead to aestheticization: an artistic practice that connected the free expressivity of the unconscious with daily life; that made artistic experience accessible to the masses rather than remaining the auratic domain of the few. We can see how Frankfurt school aesthetics, despite a shared Marxism, would part company with Benjamin at this point.

Radio Dramaturgy and Dystopia

The incorporation of radio drama within a bi-media department, together with the closing of its own script unit, has resulted in an institutional tendency to see all BBC drama output as a single category. Through the increasing domination of ratings-driven TV scheduling we can also see the kind of conservatism at work that is outlined by Russell Berman and Jürgen Habermas: erosion of two-dimensionality, fear of political critique, and narcissistic rejection of history.

For radio drama, the influence of the scheduling and content of TV (and film, to an extent) on the medium is clear; and given the loss of the script department as the site of policy generation, there is a danger that the distinctive identity of the medium is being eroded. The decision to devote seven-and-a-half hours of high quality production to the Pullman trilogy can be seen as a response to the successes of blockbuster cinema adaptations of the fantasy adventures of Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins. It purports to show that radio drama isn't an outmoded medium, left behind by the technological wizardry of the computer-generated image (CGI); that it can compete in the current vogue for ahistorical fantasy adventure.

Perhaps, too, such productions also remind audiences (or teach new ones) that the listener actively constructs the radio drama in a collaborative dramaturgy that is more creative

and personal than the explicit CGI image; and that radio has always adapted large-scale narratives as effectively at a tiny fraction of the cost. But even if this were true, it is hardly part of commissioning policy: gone is that aspect of the Esslin years which sought to educate and inform in and through drama, as well as to entertain.

In other forms of current radio drama, the listeners' imaginations have less work to do. This might be characterized in three ways: firstly the belief that audiences want radio drama in short bites; secondly that audiences prefer light entertainment; and thirdly that audiences like drama-documentary. The industry, following markets, provides more of the same. This connects radio dramaturgy with current vogues in TV production, and it has become a characteristic of much new radio drama during recent years.

Consider the three or four 15-minute readings or drama-documentaries on Radio 4 each day. These conform to the policy of the 'short-bite' production, made quickly and cheaply with one or two actors and, in the case of adaptations, lower fees for writers. An actor reads from a biography or autobiography and so is metonymically 'anchored' as the writer who experienced the events or has the authorial claim to have researched them. In addition, events are illustrated or re-enacted by other actors, which constitutes action replay. This kind of text assures the listener that what they are hearing may be dramatic – but *it is true*. It really happened, as the 'action-replay' shows. I have no objection to dramatized readings in themselves, but in this discussion I am situating them within a culture in which more challenging (more complex, demanding, and longer) radio drama production has been eroded. There is also, I believe, a drive to align scheduling with 'reality TV' – or at least there is a kind of osmosis at work.

Restrictions of the 'Attention Span'

The introduction of the 45-minute Afternoon Play slot secured commissions for many new works, many of these at first variations on drama-documentary. One problem of this

slot is its length, and this derives from the 'short-bite' policy, coupled with the effects of 'reality' broadcasting. A 45-minute play might be regarded as a one-acter, but in my experience of writing for this slot there are dramaturgical pressures deriving from the BBC's perceived 'switch-off' factor ('hook' the audience within the first two minutes), and the problem of developing a plot that avoids a second 'switch-off' moment at a little after half way. This results in reminders to the writer, during script development, and the actors, during recording, that the audience profile includes people who have just been listening to *The Archers*: many middle-aged women at home and a proportion of people in cars – a predominantly middle-aged and middle-class audience who will switch off if it finds the entertainment too challenging or 'difficult'.

Then there is another dramaturgical challenge, particular to this short slot, that at the point at which a play might 'take off', having established character and situation (about 28 minutes in), the drama needs to jump, as it were, from the first act to the third in order to reach a conclusion at 44 minutes. The scope to develop a play that seriously engages its audience is limited, and yet this is now the biggest slot for radio drama. I have recently had discussions with a producer about the extent to which a particular project, for which the only available slot is the Afternoon Play, might be developed, as it were to smuggle in a play with more challenging content that will not have people reaching for the 'off' button.

We have come a long way from the kind of groundbreaking fly-on-the-wall documentaries that Roger Graef pioneered about the police. Such work, at its best, uses a massive shooting ratio in order to assemble a record of an institution or an investigation. The editing process produces an essay in film or radio: and, as in any decent essay, there is a point of view and an argument. There has, in my view, been a gradual occlusion on all channels of 'reality TV' (like *Big Brother*, the various versions of 'savage nature' cast-aways) with gameshows (like *Pop Idol*, *The Weakest Link*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*,

Without Prejudice?) and the genre of documentary (like *Airport* and *999*) and lifestyle shows (like *Changing Rooms*, *Wife Swap*, *Diet Another Day*, *The Salon*, *Skinny Kids*, *Property Ladder*, *What Not to Wear*).

Reality TV claims to show us life as it is, because the participants are not actors, but folks just like us. It appeals to voyeurism and *Schadenfreude*; it erodes the political and the considered with an anodyne and reductive cult of personality. It is a kind of Circus Maximus of ratings-driven tabloid TV, complete with gladiatorial combat (leading to humiliation and 'casualties') and often a large cash reward. And as in the Circus Maximus, its participants are actors, whether they realize it or not. Such shows solicit and then exploit the desire for celebrity, or at least for one's fifteen minutes of fame, and they produce a type of meretricious drama that exploits this – a drama without professional actors or writers, with an eviscerated dramaturgy of voyeurism, greed, and self-promotion.

For all its perspectival shortcomings, critical theory, as Edward Said has noted, reminds us that works of art, like all cultural products, are political, whether they seek to express an overt politics or not. Thus, when Lukács wrote *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1962) during the period leading up to the 1956 Hungarian uprising, he wanted to argue for critical realism, an aspect of modernism that he believed distinguished it both from the avant-garde and from socialist realism. This is a political project: a revision of Marxist thinking about art that attempts to acknowledge historical problems – bourgeois individualism on the one hand; Stalin on the other – and to urge on the evolution of socialism in its historical struggle against capitalism. No doubt he would have agreed that capitalism inevitably produced the culture industry, but Lukács's problems lay on the other side of the Iron Curtain. He wanted to see art freed from the shackles of Stalinist oppression, and develop an aesthetic of critical realism that would nurture and promote a new kind of socialist art that was manifestly not socialist realism.

Writing in the same period, Roland Barthes grappled with the presence of ideology in

the most diverse of cultural phenomena (including critical theory), reading them for their mythic content and normative functions. 'Mythology', he wrote in 1957, staking out the new territory of semiotics, 'is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form' (1972, p. 112). A bold claim, without doubt, which seeks to wear objectivity on its sleeve – and yet, reading Barthes's witty, irreverent analyses of wrestling or steak and chips or margarine, we may also be struck by his deftness, by the fact that his insights are derived from perspectives and tastes that owe a great deal to subjectivity and social class.

The current vogue for drama-documentary in some radio commissioning cannot be separated from the dramaturgy of its TV counterparts, nor from the ideology of the postmodern. The danger is that the mendacious claim to take us closer to the truth by offering drama-documentary as entertainment also produces a degeneration of critical perspective, while it further erodes the two-dimensional: that ability of the modernist work to engage dialectically with reality. This is not only Berman's 'emphatic present counterposed to a rejected past', but also other modes of dramatic writing that try to articulate the given and the desired in all their problematics.

The flexibility and range of radio drama, as Martin Esslin pointed out more than thirty years ago, lends itself powerfully to articulations of this kind. But the erosion of programme slots in which it can happen, as a feature of policy driven by market forces, is resulting in increasing one-dimensionality: that is the circumscription both of what can be said and of how it can be spoken.

A Footnote on Censorship

In 2001 I had a radio drama in the September 'offers' that was located in the Rwanda genocide in 1994. Understandably, decisions about commissioning were affected by the events of 11 September, and I was told that my play would be held over because the BBC

had to be very careful about producing dramas that dealt with war, in whatever form. I understood the point, but argued (to no avail) that it was surely the function of art – and in the tradition of BBC drama – to address such issues, particularly at a time of such profound change. I was still shocked, however, to see that BBC TV broadcast *Band of Brothers*, a multi-part US import about the American liberation of Europe in the Second World War, in its entirety that autumn – and subsequently repeated it. As Steve Nicholson argues, it is not only a matter of who is making decisions and on what basis, of what is to be silenced, but of what we, as writers, perceive as what will be allowed when we write for radio or TV.

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