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Mid-twentieth century radio art: The ontological insecurity of the radio text

Pedro Querido

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It is often sourly remarked about our time, with its brisk pace and information overload, that it is characterised by impermanence. For an example of what prompts such distraught musings, we need not look much further than the staggering success enjoyed by messaging services like Snapchat, which elevate ephemerality to the level of organising principle. According to this view, the popularity of the 24-hour news cycle and social networking services like Twitter, along with the slow demise of print culture, are further signs of the changing times.

From a technological point of view, however, worrying about textual evanescence must sound a little quaint. While it may be contentious to speak in academic circles of the internet as an archive, its average user will likely see it as such and no doubt marvel at its unfathomable storage potential. Also, methods of inscription of texts of all kinds have never been so widely available, even offline – when so many people carry around a device that can function as a notepad, photographic camera, video camera, and voice recorder, there is quite often at least the theoretical possibility of rescuing any given text from the oblivion of impermanence by recording it in some way or another.

Yet this was not the way of things in the United Kingdom back in the 1950s and 1960s, during what has been called the ‘golden age’ of British radio drama,[1] which in turn has been deemed to have contributed to the contemporary ‘renaissance of British play-writing’.[2] Despite then-recent techno-

logical breakthroughs, most notably the introduction of the portable tape recorder, the fact was that the overwhelming majority of the works written for the medium would be produced and played once, sometimes repeated just once a few years later, only never to be heard again – not even finding their way into print publication, as was commonly the case with stage plays.

I argue that a keen historical awareness of the radio text's ontological instability – a result of the promise of permanence afforded by the written word and its aspired-to recorded performance on the one hand, and the surprising evanescence of the materialisation of that text on the other – must inform our readings of the radio drama of the time, particularly of the experimental, 'high-brow', medium-aware works created in the third quarter of the twentieth century by the likes of Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Robert Pinget, and Tom Stoppard.

In this article, my main aim is to offer a theoretical analysis of how these writers' concerns with the radio work's paradoxical status filtered down to the very structure of their creative output. This can only be accomplished after examining the technological state of affairs of mid-twentieth century radio and its implications for the creation and reception of radio works.

Mid-twentieth century radio: A netherworld of pseudo-permanence

For many scholars, the ephemerality of radio does not hold a candle to the evanescence of sound itself. According to Ulrika Maude, sounds, despite their physical origin, are 'transitory and ephemeral', which makes hearing 'a duplicitous sense', one that is 'more prone to miscalculations than vision'.^[3] Unmitigated by the kind of technology available to us today, the inscrutability of sound – or its 'ontological ambiguity', as both Frances Dyson and Clive Cazeaux labeled it^[4] – has historically caused the aural to be deemed unfit for epistemological study; for Maude, this goes some way towards explaining the long tradition of 'the association of vision with knowledge [...] in Western thought'.^[5]

Naturally, Maude, Dyson, Cazeaux, and others take exception to such a rationale, and argue for a more complete, and by extension more sympathetic and respectful, understanding of sound. For example, Dyson takes issue with the dismissal of sound not only as an epistemic object (under the influence of post-Enlightenment thought) but also as a technological object

(in the modern context of contemporary sound theory).[6] Also, Cazeaux, in his phenomenological study of sound, stresses that what is routinely seen as the ‘incompleteness’ of radio art turns out to be ‘instead the gap or opening wherein invitational relationships constitutive of a work’s expressive potential can be constructed’.[7]

Nevertheless, and despite the fact that perceived failings of sound in general and radio art in particular can be celebrated as strengths, often at the core of such arguments still lies the notion that sound is ephemeral and thus ontologically ambiguous. It bears mentioning that this is not a unanimous perspective. Jonathan Sterne, for instance, writes eloquently against the notion of a transhistorical and essentialist account of sound’s ‘special’ nature.[8] Sterne draws on the work of Rick Altman, whose terms ‘historical fallacy’ and ‘ontological fallacy’ describe early film critics’ efforts to disregard the element of sound by making transhistorical and essentialist claims based on concrete historical practices.[9] Still, it is safe to say that today, even with the benefit of ubiquitous modern sound recording technologies, most people still think about sound as more ephemeral and epistemologically slippery than sight, for instance, and this was all the more so in the 1950s and 1960s.

It is not surprising, then, that early radio, relying almost entirely on live transmission as it did in its early years, was perceived as ‘an especially ephemeral medium’.[10] Since ‘there were no pre-recorded programmes’, whatever came out of the radio ‘was heard and then it was gone’.[11] Such ‘dissipation of waves in space’ means that ‘that very radio *presence* that so fundamentally marked the decades of the 1920s and 1930s’ will forever be inaccessible to us.[12] This merely aggravated the long-standing neglect of aurality in artistic practice,[13] which would only begin to be addressed once the appropriate technological means became widespread; as Douglas Khan points out, the ‘modern artistic fixation on sound’ was enabled precisely by the fixation *of* sound, and ever since that was achieved ‘the connection between sound and technology has endured’.[14]

The arrival of inscription technologies brought great changes not only to subsequent radio practices but also to the perceived stability and epistemological currency of sound. What Dyson calls ‘the miracle of the phonograph’ gave sound materiality, ‘perdurability’, and ‘three-dimensionality’.[15] Most importantly, the inscription of sound allowed it to be reproduced at will, as well as manipulated in many different ways. What is more, radio’s interest in the inscription of sound was partly motivated by self-preservation: in her study *The Wireless Past*, Emily Bloom writes that ‘the fear of obsolescence that

haunts radio in the 1950s' led to 'a concomitant impulse toward archivization', and it took on that new role as archive or repository with relish, as a way to shore up its deteriorating cultural capital.[16]

Strangely, though, this momentous technological breakthrough took its time to add a sense of permanency to sound art. Even well into the 1950s and 1960s, repeats of radio works were not common practice; most of them were allotted a 'single broadcast', 'followed by one solitary repeat performance'. [17] Naturally, this vanishing act was widely regarded as an 'inherent drawback to radio drama'[18] – indeed, 'one of the major fears of creative writers' concerning radio was 'that their work for radio would just be sucked in by the air waves and never heard of again'. [19] In her discussion of sonic obsolescence in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Bloom raises an important larger point, namely the fact that 'sound preservation technologies are not, in the end, capable of protecting against either technological obsolescence or the ephemerality of memory itself'. [20]

The inexorable impermanence of the radio archive – the establishment of the Sound Archive Library did little to stem the tide, since 'most broadcasts continued to go unrecorded or the recordings were destroyed'[21] – only served to magnify the fleetingness of radio art, which remained uniquely vulnerable. As Paddy Scannell points out, the single programme 'has no identity: It is a transient thing that perishes in the moment of its transmission'. [22] The brutal insubstantiality of radio art reception can be better understood through a first-hand account of it. David Pownall, a prolific radio practitioner active in the last third of the twentieth century, has written on his personal experience with the intangibility of radio art and its discouraging lack of echo. Having had his first radio play produced, he was distraught to find that 'there was no response', as though it had fallen 'into a bottomless abyss'. [23] Listening to it on the radio on his own gave the experience no sense of fellowship, and the lack of critical reactions added 'to the odd feeling that nothing had happened'. [24] When later works did generate a response, it was 'fragmentary, desultory', and Pownall found that the only way to endure that 'disheartening evaporation' was to write for himself alone. [25]

Other ways of granting radio works a more permanent status fared little better. Concerns with the 'very little critical attention [that] was being directed at this work' in the 1950s and 1960s [26] – which was still a reality case decades later [27] – were not greatly allayed by the possibility of print publication or stage adaptation. The transition into print – or, to a lesser extent,

'the dubious prize of being transferred to the stage'[28] – was a privilege accorded only to the extremely select few radio works that entered the canon, and 'it was not until BBC Publications began to branch out from journals into books in the 1960s that scripts began to be published on a more regular basis'.[29] Even so, and as late as in the 1980s, 'the very small number' of radio plays published meant that radio art's textual impact was 'minimal'.[30] To make matters worse, scholars intent on analysing radio works which were broadcast but not published will often run into a stone wall, 'for such recordings do not exist'.[31]

In his 1959 treatise on radio, Donald McWhinnie delves at some length into this paradox – that is to say, the impermanence of radio art at a time when 'the magical device of electro-magnetic tape-recording and editing' was already one of the radio writer's tools of choice.[32] As we have seen, the performance of radio art, as always and more or less by definition, 'is ephemeral, it dissolves as soon as it is heard';[33] the problem in the 1950s and 1960s, writes McWhinnie, was that it was rarely repeated – unlike contemporary theatre or cinema – and not available 'as and when you wish' it[34] – unlike today's podcasts, for instance. Even written scripts would often succumb to the same fate, as 'a prodigious number of scripts' simply vanished 'into oblivion'.[35] Because 'the radio writer may see his work disappear like a stone in a pond', McWhinnie is led to infer that radio art must be 'unique in its quality and rewarding in itself, regardless of material considerations'.[36] This thankless work required a special kind of selflessness and intrinsic motivation, and indeed McWhinnie, writing from the vantage point of the temporal and spatial epicentre of the United Kingdom's golden age of radio, is confident that were it not for the continuous commitment of 'a great many devoted practitioners', radio art 'could easily disappear altogether'.[37]

It is remarkable just how ephemeral a medium like radio can be even when inscription is possible. McWhinnie very correctly pointed out that while ephemerality was the concept that best described 'Sound Radio' at the time when he was writing *The Art of Radio*, that was 'not necessarily a permanent condition of radio, but simply a condition brought about by immediate demands and policies' – for example, he lauds Richard Hughes' suggestion of broadcasting a deserving radio programme 'every night for at least a week'.[38] The fact remains, however, that '[l]ittle effort was made to preserve the content of broadcasts, even once the technology existed', and for this reason, and somewhat counterintuitively, 'radio has been as ephemeral historically as were its original productions, so pervasive as to be overlooked'.[39]

This shows the danger of what Khan termed ‘technologically determinist’ views; just like, as Khan notes, the ‘mere availability’ of the magnetic tape recorder ‘did not spontaneously engender an art appropriate to it’,[40] neither did inscription technologies immediately do away with that feeling of evanescence,[41] which in fact we still today, despite all our recording technologies and archival possibilities, associate with radio.[42] The question is, how did the experience of being exposed to (and, more importantly, wading into) this netherworld of pseudo-permanence influence the budding radio practitioners of the time? The answer is twofold: on the one hand, it called for simplicity and intelligibility; on the other hand, and in an apparent contradiction, it encouraged them to thematise ambiguity.

The inescapable need for intelligibility

The perceived nature of sound (and by extension radio and radio art) played a vital role in the quest for intelligibility. For Maude as for so many others, sounds ‘are transitory and ephemeral’, and for this reason hearing is ‘a duplicitous sense’, one that is ‘more prone to miscalculations than vision’.[43] This notion is corroborated by McWhinnie’s assertion that natural sounds (as opposed to sound effects) are ‘extremely difficult to identify’ on their own, that is to say, without visual context or ‘divorced from the text’.[44] This is why acousmatic sound (sound whose original source is hidden), according to scholars like Brian Keane, is said to be defined by ‘ontological uncertainty’.[45]

These beliefs were widespread in the middle of the twentieth century, held by radio professionals, critics, and audiences alike, and this is part of the reason why sound art in general and the medium of radio in particular have been so suitable for the exploration of the idea ‘that any sense of epistemological surety is illusionary’, as the French polymath Marcel Duchamp did in his innovative sound work.[46] The ‘abiding sense of doubt’ found in Duchamp’s aural art[47] would, almost half a century later, permeate the radio work of Tom Stoppard, who in *Artist Descending a Staircase* sets out to demonstrate, as Elissa Guralnick explains, that ‘our senses, by their nature, are imperfect guides to truth’ by revealing ‘our limitations as listeners’.[48]

What is curious about radio art is that, although its reliance on sound alone makes it an intrinsically challenging endeavour for its listeners, such difficulty of proper comprehension is compounded by the fact that radio lis-

tening has historically been a background rather than a main activity,[49] especially ever since the emergence of the revolutionary technology of the transistor in 1947.[50] What is today more or less a given about radio was also true and already evident in the 1930s, when Rudolf Arnheim remarked that radio ‘encourages the mind to wander’ and thus ‘tends to become the auditory foil of daily occupations, attracting sporadic attention, but not really commanding its audience’[51] – around that time the BBC began to conduct audience research, and so was forced to acknowledge ‘that people did other things while they listened to the radio’.[52] This traditional function as ‘sonic background’ has led radio to be ‘often referred to as a “secondary” medium’.[53] The parallel activities, allied with the almost inevitable distractions around the radio listener, means that the broadcast ‘usually manages to gain only half the listener’s ear’.[54]

This is unfortunate, because radio art demands ‘the full attention of an active audience’.[55] Radio is a ‘coercively temporal’ medium,[56] and the listener must be willing and able to invest a considerable amount of time and energy – as Pownall notes, no one will ‘sit down and listen to bad radio the same way they’ll sit down to watch bad television’.[57] McWhinnie in particular is keen on stressing radio’s elitist bent, considering it to be unsuitable for idle enjoyment because ‘the best of its creations demand conscious attention, not blank-minded acceptance’;[58] for McWhinnie, the ideal audience of radio art is proactive and intellectually curious, and for that reason it ‘will inevitably be a minority one’.[59] The radio listener, then, is at once ‘blind’ (and thus reliant only on the sense of hearing for the decoding of external stimuli), ‘absent’ (that is, ‘not where the play is being performed’, and thus ‘surrounded by the distractions of their own separate environments’), and, lacking as they are in ‘a highly developed sense of occasion’, ‘exacting in that they need not sit the play out, they can simply switch it off’.[60]

This extraordinary cluster of traits ascribed to the radio audience, combined with the intrinsic fleetingness of the spoken word, begged for a more palatable content.[61] So radio art adapted, developing, according to Richard Hand and Mary Traynor, certain narrative conventions in order to ‘compensate’ (a commonly used verb in this context) for the peculiar nature of radio art transmission and reception: ‘Narrative structure tends to be uncomplicated, involving few characters, and the language is descriptive’.[62] This was necessary in order to mitigate the perceived limitations of radio, such as the ‘temporal pressures’ of broadcasting and the overtaxing demands of the aural on the listener’s memory.[63] According to Shawn VanCour, these pressures

and concerns coalesced into a few core principles of intelligibility for early radio art: these included ‘aural intelligibility’ and ‘sonic parsimony’, two principles adapted from radio music.[64] Intelligibility, then, became ‘unquestionably a chief concern of radio producers for both musical and dramatic presentation throughout the 1920s’ and thereafter.[65]

The drive towards intelligibility when writing for radio can often be discerned when comparing radio works to stage plays penned by the same writer. Pinget’s *La Manivelle* and *Lettre Morte*, published a year apart and often together by Minuit, are a good example of this: though the style is rather similar, the structure and themes of the radio piece are manifestly simpler than those of *Lettre Morte*. An analogous observation has been made by Martin Esslin, who considers that Beckett’s most renowned works written in French for the stage in the 1950s (such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*) do not really compare in terms of complexity with its contemporaries *Embers* or *All That Fall*. [66]

We see VanCour’s principles at play in radio works by Beckett, Pinget, Pinter, and Stoppard. Despite its relatively large cast, Beckett’s *All That Fall* strives towards aural intelligibility in that there is no overlap between characters’ speeches. Pinget’s *La Manivelle*, Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*, and Beckett’s *Embers* actually combine aural intelligibility with sonic parsimony, since they all feature a small cast of virtually (though not technically) two and no overlapping lines. With its convoluted structure, rather undifferentiable cast of main male characters, and elaborate aural illusions, Stoppard’s *Artist Descending a Staircase* is the only work analysed here that openly flaunts the principles of aural intelligibility and sonic parsimony – yet it does so knowingly, parodically, and, as we shall see presently, not without allaying its intricacy with the help of listener-friendly stylistic devices, namely repetition.

The abundant recourse to repetition is a particularly conspicuous marker of this drive towards formal simplicity. For instance, it can take the form of an insidious recurrence, such as the different hues of the manifold allusions, subtle and overt, to the theme of sterility found in *All That Fall*. [67] More explicit repetitions are also pervasive: notice the cars passing by in *La Manivelle* and the attendant protests by the mishearing old men, Flora’s reiterated depictions of the matchseller as old and harmless in *A Slight Ache*, Henry’s ritualistic summoning of sounds and voices in *Embers*, and the magnetic tape loops heard throughout *Artist Descending a Staircase*. Also, in many cases we even find an actual musical leitmotif, such as the ‘old tune’ that al-

ways follows Toupin's reminiscing in *La Manivelle*, the famous use of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* in *All That Fall*, or the omnipresent droning sound of the sea in *Embers*.

In radio works with undeniably complex formal structures, such as Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase*, repetition often functions as a built-in solution to help the listener navigate the plot's intricacies. Stoppard's radio work gravitates around a mysterious recording of a fatal incident, and a probe of the circumstances and motivations of the characters involved leads to a series of flashbacks, which are then progressively unwound back to the starting point – that is to say, the plot is circular in shape.[68] But when the characters often repeat themselves and each another (and they often do so), they do this not only to emphasise the circularity of the plot, or even merely as aids to the listener's overexerted memory, but also to shed some light on the plot itself.[69] For example, certain details find themselves foreshadowed (or echoed, depending on whether we follow the chronology of the events as they unfold in the radio work or as they originally happened): Donner's fall to his death is primed not only by Sophie's own (which, again, actually occurs first) but also by his own stated fear as a young man of dying '*ridiculously*'. [70]

Complexity – the arch-enemy of distracted ears deprived of physically stable signifiers – is also tempered by repetition in plays lauded for their thematic as opposed to formal intricacy, such as Beckett's *Embers*. Less accessible than *All That Fall*, the Irish writer's previous attempt for the airwaves, it is suffused with seventeenth-century philosophical ideas,[71] yet just like its predecessor, whose soundscape is haunted by a multitude of echoes,[72] in *Embers* complexity is counterbalanced by a myriad of repetitions: virtually all of the protagonist's many commands and shamanistic summons are repeated at least once; half of his never-ending story consists of iterations; and even the sound effects and flashbacks, sparse as they are, have a perennial quality to them. Besides serving their main dramatic purposes, these repetitions do not merely give the listener some cognitive respite but also inculcate certain images and effects, thus improving the auditor's comprehension of the work.

Intelligibility, then, was an unavoidable factor to take into account by radio art practitioners active in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century.[73] For instance, Beckett, who 'was no novice in wireless and recording technologies' when he began to write for radio, seems to have 'privileged narrative continuity and linearity in his radio plays' at least partly as a result of his awareness of 'the BBC's fear of radical experimentation' – in this

he was in harmony with his producer McWhinnie, who ‘expressed strong reservations about [...] the prioritization of sonic experimentation over the script itself.’[74] Significantly, *Embers*, a radio piece where repetition plays such a crucial role, was Beckett’s attempt at writing a work more radiophonic than its predecessor, *All That Fall*. [75] Even more tellingly, that first radio piece may itself have been the result of Beckett’s deliberate decision ‘to be clearer and more accessible’, in a bid to appeal to the Third Programme’s mass audience.[76]

Indeed, when discussing radio art broadcasting in the United Kingdom, it is impossible not to mention that ‘national cultural institution’, [77] which was responsible for the production and broadcast of all the radio works discussed in this article (in Pinget’s case, in the guise of Beckett’s translation, titled *The Old Tune*). Before the Third Programme, ‘anything that was not comfortably middlebrow tended to be offered rather apologetically’; proposals were made for a separate, more intellectually stimulating broadcasting station, but they were turned down, and so ‘for the remainder of the 1930s the BBC muddled along, with its two existing radio networks trying to serve all tastes’.[78] In her history of the Third Programme, which from 1946 to 1970 had ‘the specific goal of “promoting excellence” regardless of the demands of the mass audience’, Kate Whitehead writes on how it made ‘few concessions to popularity or already well-established trends’, as ‘a freedom from concern with ratings allowed the Third Programme to risk failure and to encourage experiment’.[79]

What made the Third Programme dysfunctional and ultimately unsustainable was the fact that, while the BBC created that radio network specifically for the purpose of broadcasting more challenging art and content, it still had to conform to the BBC’s broader aims and guiding principles, namely the famous Reithian doctrine. This meant that the Third Programme was caught between the very different worlds of avant-gardism and mass entertainment: ‘the tensions involved in mediating modernism itself to a “mass” audience’ resulted ‘in the near-impossible balancing act of effectively mediating modernism to an audience wider than such works had ever before enjoyed, while somehow avoiding its “massification” as well’.[80] When this balance was impossible to achieve, as was often the case, the Third Programme Controllers tended to take a stand that neglected the pedagogical and entertainment aspects.[81] As Whitehead observes, ‘the patron and the educator could not coexist’; pitted against one another in an ‘inevitable conflict’, those

two roles turned out to be irreconcilable.[82] Faced with recurrent accusations of elitism from the listeners[83] yet paradoxically and at the same time regarded ‘as an agent of popularization’ by the modernist writers engaged in radio art,[84] the Third Programme was criticised from day one and throughout its existence, so the writing was on the wall well before its demise in 1970.

The Third Programme’s tension between its high art and its mass audience perfectly mirrors the conflict between two key aspects of radio art in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Working artistically for a mass medium like radio – where the audience only has access to aural stimuli and no control over the reproduction of the content – requires that more attention is paid to simplicity and clarity than would normally be necessary. However, the very ‘ontological ambiguity’ of sound that calls for plainness and intelligibility also tempted radio writers to probe the philosophical ramifications of such ambiguity, namely the way that sensorial unreliability is linked to epistemological scepticism.

The thematisation of ambiguity

It may sound strange to associate radio art with scepticism when in its early days the medium was seen as capable of enabling immersive,[85] unmediated, almost supernatural experiences. Indeed, the association of radio with spiritualism harks back to the medium’s beginnings: ‘It is misguided to construct a history of radio in which the spiritualism is an excrescence; it was one key to the medium’s very development’.[86] As John Durham Peters rightly states,

early radio history is inseparable from daring imaginings about the flight of souls, voices without bodies, and instantaneous presence at a distance. Dreams of bodiless contact were a crucial condition not only of popular discourse but of technical invention as well.[87]

Related to this is what is called ‘liveness’, often considered to be an intrinsic trait to radio even in today’s age of routine sound recording,[88] but especially in the mid-twentieth century radio soundscape. ‘What must never be forgotten’, writes Whitehead, ‘is that, until the 1950s, the majority of plays, features and talks still went out live’.[89] In fact, the BBC ‘cherished the notion of the superiority of live broadcasts’ into the 1950s, that is, ‘long after it had been abandoned in other countries’ and ‘long after prerecording had be-

come easily practicable'.[90] Direct transmission gave radio an aura of authenticity, immediacy, and even supernatural reach: as the wireless voice magically 'transfused throughout the electronic ether',[91] the medium readily lent itself to associations with spiritism, the fantastic, and the occult.[92] In fact, the networks themselves were only too happy to peddle the myth of radio as 'a magical box providing direct access to the phantoms of the ether, wonderland, and, ultimately, to God'.[93]

Traces of the idea that radio can establish a live, direct, immediate, and personal connection with obscure beings or events can still be found in contemporary critical discourse, for example in the near-universal belief that intimacy and immediacy are key traits of the medium: 'The idea that radio is intimate is something of a commonplace in radio literature'.[94] As early as in the 1930s, Arnheim considered the 'close-up' to be 'the normal position and historically the first',[95] and McWhinnie saw in that 'close focus' the 'power to communicate secret states of mind, the inner world and private vision of the speaker'.[96] Guralnick observes that radio has great potential for 'intimacy and immediacy' even though it 'communicates with millions of listeners'.[97] Interestingly, this often-noted paradox undercuts radio's claim to intimacy; it is the reason why 'radio has been thought of both as the most intimate of communications and the most impersonal', perhaps even 'characterized both by the intimacy of its impersonality and the impersonality of its intimacy'.[98] Some commentators have gone as far as to claim the opposite, that is to say, that radio inevitably has a mediating, 'distancing effect'.[99]

But while deep down we know that even 'if radio does appear to come from nowhere, it can never in fact do so', because it requires a 'material intermediary or apparatus',[100] 'coming from nowhere' is nevertheless the effect that radio can create – and it is an effect very ably exploited by radio art practitioners in the middle of the twentieth century. For McWhinnie, 'radio is supremely a storyteller's medium, as one would expect: the voice coming out of the dark, in the firelight'.[101] In many radio works, the storyteller meets the shaman, as the protagonists make use of speech (endowed as it is with awe-inspiring powers in the medium of radio) to invoke background sounds (the farm noises summoned by Maddy in *All That Fall*), the voices of the dead (as is most likely Ada's case in *Embers*), or even, as in *A Slight Ache*, ineffable entities that are otherwise impossible to represent, notably on the stage. Moreover, the conjuring tricks of the spoken word in radio art can be deliberate – as when Henry's repeated commands in *Embers* spawn concrete actions – or inadvertent – as when sleuthing prompts the flashbacks in *Artist*

Descending a Staircase, or when reminiscing triggers the playing of the old tune in *La Manivelle*. In any case, the fact that these works were written specifically for radio is clear from the way they engage with the perceived ethereal quality of the medium and the shamanistic and otherworldly character associated to its art.

That ethereal, almost magical quality of aural art is commonly entwined with the thematisation of sensory and epistemological scepticism – and this is part of the reason why ambiguity is so often deemed radiogenic. After all, the best instances of radio art often take the form of a ‘perceptual maze’, as Guralnick described *A Slight Ache*, [102] and radio writers are uniquely fond ‘of building up realities only to knock them from under the listener’s feet’. [103] ‘Radio’s reality is never consistent’ [104] – it is a medium of nuance and microscopic effects, [105] spell-binding and deceitful, [106] and for that reason uniquely apt ‘for creating indeterminacy’, [107] or ‘ambiguity and uncertainty’. [108]

The radio works discussed here are certainly no exception. Stoppard’s *Artist Descending a Staircase* is famously built around an enigma: originally, the question the listener is invited to figure out is who killed Donner; then, it turns out that he may have simply fallen down the stairs while trying to swat a fly – crucially, however, the answer is not spelled out, and must remain a mystery. Moreover, there are ancillary riddles in the build up to that fateful event: whom did Sophie really fall in love with? Was the painting that made her fall in love with the respective artist a black fence in the snow or a white one on a black background? As Guralnick states, ‘[s]uch a wealth of ambiguity leaves the characters, no less than the audience, embarrassed by their riches’. [109]

Another consummate example is Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*. It features a logic-defying creature, the matchseller, who in different times is described as ‘a bullock’ by Flora, ‘a jelly’ by Edward, and perhaps most importantly as a ‘harmless old man’ who somehow all of a sudden begins to look ‘younger’, in fact ‘extraordinarily’ so. [110] While all of this is unsettling enough, the fact that the matchseller remains mute throughout calls into question his very existence, since it is well known that in radio to be is to speak. Yet the ineffable nature of the matchseller is only one aspect of the precariousness of the soundscape of *A Slight Ache*, which also owes much to meaningful details such as the hazy and potentially significant references to Flora in Edward’s autobiographical account, or even to the first dialogue of the radio work, which,

inane and full of unresolved images, sets the tone for the overriding sense of doubt that necessarily arises from this listening experience.[111]

Even Pinget's *La Manivelle*, which is much more straightforward than all the other works analysed here, has its blind spots. Unlike the other radio works, in which the unreliability of sensory data is the main culprit of epistemological uncertainty, *La Manivelle* focuses on the failure of another vital factor in the equation of knowledge: memory. As they trade faulty recollections back and forth, the listener is left with precious little in the way of concrete details that would add plausibility to their haphazard account of their common past. Toupin forgets things that happened both decades and moments ago, and his companion Pommard blames his daughter for imaginary thefts.[112] Underneath its naturalistic veneer, then, there lurks in *La Manivelle* a voracious uncertainty that gnaws at the foundations of its own fictional world.

As for Beckett's radio works, it should come as no surprise to any listener familiar with his oeuvre that ambiguity reigns supreme. It starts with the first sounds we hear in *All That Fall*: How real are the farm noises in *All That Fall*? In the original production, McWhinnie chose to have human actors make those noises instead of recorded sounds of actual animals;[113] add to that the fact that the protagonist seemingly elicits such noises at will[114] and the effect is one of doubt as for the veracity of the whole soundscape. In addition, the final mystery – did Dan have a hand in the death of the child under the train wheels? – must remain, like in *Artist Descending a Staircase*, unsolvable, surely much to the chagrin of listeners accustomed to more traditional whodunnits.

In *Embers* too analogous questions are raised: How real is Ada, considering that no sounds issue from her actions and movements, and that she speaks in a '[l]ow remote voice throughout'?[115] And did Henry's father die in an accident, commit suicide, or simply desert his family? But in *Embers* uncertainty is taken to new heights, as there seem to be more loose ends than established facts: What bearing does the Bolton/Holloway story have on Henry's life? Is that droning sound really the sound of the sea?[116] Is the listener actually inside Henry's head? Aural intelligibility may be radiogenic, but so too is ambiguity: after all, as we have seen, Cazeaux shows that from the phenomenological perspective these works, riddled as they are with open-ended questions, should be interpreted not as mere finished fragments, as it were, or the

necessary product of an ontologically frail medium built on a single epistemologically frail sense, but instead as openings for the kind of ‘invitational relationships’ that are proper to art – as well as to sound itself.[117]

So, while sound in general and the medium of radio in particular may have frequently been believed to possess a great potential for an immersive sensory (and even extrasensory) experience, the more experimental instances of mid-twentieth century radio art broadcast by the Third Programme demonstrate instead the medium’s suitability to foster distance through uncertainty, ambiguity, and scepticism. The aforementioned imperative of intelligibility may seem to rub against these themes, but the equilibrium between the two, and the ensuing tension, is as hard to find as it is artistically valuable: ‘In a way that now seems remarkable, modernist textual practices were adapted by radio auteurs to produce an auditory art that not only complicated radio storytelling but also remained accessible to large audiences’.[118]

McWhinnie’s postulate in his 1959 book *The Art of Radio* – ‘The quicksand of radio lies between its need for absolute clarity and its fascinating capacity for complexity’[119] – was thus given consummate expression by the young and bright radio practitioners of his day examined here. Undaunted by the largely negative associations with the medium of radio and acutely aware of its peculiarities, they set out to thematise the radiogenic notions of scepticism and ambiguity in a way that might still remain accessible to the mass audience that their broadcasts would reach. And it is a testament to the quality and ingenuity of those radio works that they transcended the immediate context of the quite specific conditions, limitations, and possibilities of the technological state of affairs of mid-twentieth century British radio and stood the test of time.

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Notes

- [1] Rodger 1982, p. 85; Billington 2007, p. 95.
- [2] Whitehead 1989, p. 138.
- [3] Maude 2009a, pp. 57-58.
- [4] Dyson 2009, p. 10; Cazeaux 2005, p. 172.
- [5] Maude 2009a, p. 118.
- [6] Dyson 2009, p. 27. The assumption that sound has historically been neglected by theorists is quite recurrent in sound studies but, when it is extended to include more contemporary discourses, far from uncontroversial: 'It has become cliché to rail against "ocularcentrism" and decry the visualist bias of modernist historiography. The current critical consensus is that modernity organized the

senses in complex, overlapping, and situationally contingent ways. No single sense was privileged; each was uniquely configured and utilized' (Curtin 2014, p. 8).

- [7] Cazeaux 2005, pp. 166-167.
- [8] Sterne 2003, pp. 14-19
- [9] Altman 1980, pp. 14-15
- [10] Cohen & Coyle & Lewty 2009, p. 2.
- [11] Maude 2009b, p. 124.
- [12] Cohen & Coyle, & Lewty 2009, p. 2 (original emphasis).
- [13] Khan 1992, p. 2.
- [14] Ibid., p. 5.
- [15] Dyson 2009, p. 47.
- [16] Bloom 2016, pp. 158, 129.
- [17] Rodger 1982, p. 155.
- [18] Carpenter 1996, p. 243.
- [19] Whitehead 1989, p. 86.
- [20] Bloom 2016, pp. 153-154.
- [21] Ibid., p. 130.
- [22] Scannell 1995, p. 8.
- [23] Pownall 2012, n.p.
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] Ibid.
- [26] Whitehead 1989, p. 90.
- [27] Priessnitz 1981, p. 28.
- [28] Guralnick 1996, p. 153.
- [29] Whitehead 1989, p. 91.
- [30] Priessnitz 1981, pp. 30, 31.
- [31] Priessnitz 1981, p. 32.
- [32] McWhinnie 1959, p. 107.
- [33] Ibid., p. 43.
- [34] Ibid., p. 99.
- [35] Ibid., p. 152.
- [36] Ibid., pp. 156, 157.
- [37] Ibid., p. 184.
- [38] Ibid., p. 99.
- [39] Cohen & Coyle & Lewty 2009, pp. 2, 7.
- [40] Khan 1992, p. 12.

- [41] Drakakis 1981, p. 29.
- [42] The arrival of the magnetic audiotape in the middle of the twentieth century seemed to promise to change the pervasive perception of sound as an inadequate object of knowledge, and perhaps even to usher in a more positivist outlook, thus spoiling the experimental radio writer's appetite for the thematisation of empirical uncertainty. However, in contemporary radio works such as *Artist Descending a Staircase*, sound inscription is shown to fail to live up to its epistemological sturdiness. Just as the refinement and widespread adoption of inscription technologies did not instantly diminish the feeling of impermanence hovering over the medium of radio, neither did the sheer possibility of fixation of sound do much to allay doubts of its empirical epistemological usefulness and accuracy. In fact, one could argue that writers such as Beckett, Pinter, and Stoppard may have been drawn to the medium of radio in part precisely because of how easily it lends itself to such sceptical cogitations.
- [43] Maude 2009a, pp. 57, 58.
- [44] McWhinnie 1959, pp. 79, 80.
- [45] Keane 2014, p. 179. As we have seen, not all experts agree on these and related ideas (that sound be an inherently unstable signifier, or a historically neglected one, or even one with any special inherent properties) – but arguably, for the purposes of this article, it is less important what sound is than what it is perceived to be.
- [46] Adcock 1992, p. 126.
- [47] *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- [48] Guralnick 1996, pp. 30, 51.
- [49] Hand & Traynor 2011, p. 35.
- [50] Crisell 1994, pp. 28-29.
- [51] Arnheim 1936, p. 8.
- [52] Chignell 2009, p. 100.
- [53] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- [54] Arnheim 1936, p. 268.
- [55] Chignell 2009, p. 9.
- [56] Perloff 1999, p. 249.
- [57] Pownall 2012, n.p.
- [58] McWhinnie 1959, p. 43.
- [59] *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 26, 156.
- [60] Crisell 1994, p. 145.
- [61] Hand & Traynor 2011, p. 41.
- [62] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- [63] Drakakis 1981, p. 32.
- [64] VanCour 2018, pp. 100, 73, 95.
- [65] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- [66] Esslin 2014, pp. 53-54.
- [67] See Stewart 2009, p. 172.
- [68] Guralnick 1996, p. 35.

- [69] See Guralnick 1996, pp. 36ff.
- [70] Stoppard 1994, p. 148 (original emphasis).
- [71] Frost 2014, p. 257.
- [72] See, e.g., Zilliacus 1999, pp. 307-308.
- [73] McWhinnie 1959, p. 108.
- [74] Morin 2014, pp. 4, 5, 2.
- [75] Frost 2014, p. 256.
- [76] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- [77] Tonning 2017, p. 59.
- [78] Carpenter 1996, pp. 4, 5.
- [79] Whitehead 1989, pp. 1, 122. On the 'serious hostility inside and outside the BBC' towards the Third Programme since its inception, see Briggs 1995, pp. 60ff.
- [80] Tonning 2017, pp. 75, 77.
- [81] Briggs 1995, pp. 63-64.
- [82] Whitehead 1989, pp. 2, 18.
- [83] *Ibid.*, p. 48; Crisell 1994, p. 27.
- [84] Tonning 2017, p. 60.
- [85] Dyson 2009, pp. 4, 6. For dissenting arguments, see Sterne 2003, p. 14ff; Kendrick 2017, p. 12.
- [86] Peters 1999, p. 106.
- [87] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- [88] Halliday 2013, p. 70. In a footnote, Sam Halliday admits that nowadays this notion is complicated 'by the use of recordings as the actual content of many broadcasts', but he makes a point of bringing to attention 'the basic fact that "live" presentation is the default mode of commercial radio' (Halliday 2013, p. 86, n. 51).
- [89] Whitehead 1989, p. 33. Contrast this with the German montage techniques, which typically were pre-recorded, as opposed to the British live montage: see Shingler 2000, pp. 199-202.
- [90] Zilliacus 1976, p. 23. This penchant for live transmission had several implications, some of which had a direct impact on the production of radio art. For instance, it helps explain why 'dramatic recordings in long takes' were still in vogue during that decade; crucially for the purposes of this article, '[t]he BBC recording of All That Fall was virtually a one-take session' (Zilliacus 1976, p. 23).
- [91] Dyson 2009, p. 46.
- [92] Sconce 2009, p. 32. See also Dyson 2009, p. 31.
- [93] Jenemann 2009, p. 95.
- [94] Chignell 2009, p. 85.
- [95] Arnheim 1936, p. 71.
- [96] McWhinnie 1959, p. 57.
- [97] Guralnick 1996, pp. 192, 131.
- [98] Connor 2009, p. 275.
- [99] Laws 2017, p. 107.

- [100] Connor 2009, pp. 276-277.
- [101] McWhinnie 1959, p. 61.
- [102] Guralnick 1996, p. 126.
- [103] Gray 1981, p. 61.
- [104] Ibid.
- [105] McWhinnie 1959, p. 65.
- [106] Jenemann 2009, p. 101.
- [107] Guralnick 1996, p. 101.
- [108] Laws 2017, p. 130.
- [109] Guralnick 1996, pp. 38-39.
- [110] Pinter 1982, pp. 17, 29, 16, 39.
- [111] Stulberg 2015, pp. 511-512.
- [112] Pinget 1970, pp. 38-40, 24.
- [113] For a detailed rationale of this decision, which Beckett did not approve, see McWhinnie 1959, pp. 133-150.
- [114] Beckett 2006, p. 192.
- [115] Ibid., p. 257.
- [116] The original BBC production of 1959 featured a stylised, drone-like sound; just like the use of human actors for farmyard noises in *All That Fall*, Beckett was not satisfied with the effect, and in a later American production he asked the producer to not attempt it (see Frost 1991, p. 365).
- [117] Cazeaux 2005, pp. 166-167, 172-173.
- [118] Porter 2016, n.p.
- [119] McWhinnie 1959, p. 108.