

## Non-Embodied Old Voices?

### Problematizing Old Age, Embodiment, and Scepticism in Radio Art

In recent years there has been a welcome surge of academic research on the issue of embodiment – but we would be remiss to assume that the Cartesian temptation of believing an ageless, ‘pure’ self to be trapped in the irrational cage that is the body has been definitively overcome: as the years go by and take their toll on the body, the inkling of a non-embodied reality can unsettle even the staunchest materialist.

Anyone interested in not only experimenting with but also challenging notions of non-embodiment<sup>1</sup> would be well advised to turn to the mainstream artistic medium that arguably lends itself the most to such lines of inquiry: radio. Thus the analysis of radio art, namely the more experimental variety of mid-twentieth-century Western Europe, might lead us to a better understanding of the stubborn pull of the mind/body dualism, and perhaps even the ways in which it might be resisted.

In this article, I aim to examine a few distinct but intertwined aspects of works of some well known and oft-compared mid-twentieth-century radio practitioners (Samuel Beckett, Robert Pinget, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard). These aspects are the medium of these artworks (radio) and the way it synergizes with their explorations of non-embodiment; the significant decision to thematize old age; and the

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout, and when relevant, I strive to preserve the distinction made in philosophical discourse between disembodiment, ‘the immaterial state of existence of a person who *previously* had a body’, and ‘non-embodiment or immateriality’ – see Edward Wierenga, ‘Disembodiment’, in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 277-78 (p. 277, my emphasis).

philosophical underpinnings that can be said to inform this article's corpus's works (epistemological scepticism), again by virtue of their chosen medium.

In this article I will summarize at some length the discussions and findings concerning each of the key aspects of my proposed theoretical framework centred on the possibilities of radio – that is, notions of dis- and non-embodiment, the theme of old age, and the idea of epistemological uncertainty. These cornerstones, along with a brief account of each of the works that make up this article's corpus, will help demonstrate how their respective writers, as though piqued by a common challenge, turned to radio to entertain the possibility, or problematize the idea, of a non-embodied old voice. Then, I will show that the aforementioned key aspects inform each other in a positive feedback loop. Finally, after those intricate connections have been established, I will ascertain whether the sum of the parts can be said to amount to a positive statement of some kind. First and foremost, however, the medium itself will be scrutinized, more specifically the tension that arises from radio's technical reliance on the very real and concrete voice on the one hand and its perceived aesthetic drive towards fantasies of non-embodiment on the other.

### 1. Radio as Visual

Everyone knows that radio is, first and foremost, an aural medium. But is it a visual one as well? Some decades ago this query would have sounded odd, if not downright preposterous, whereas nowadays there is considerable debate on the extent to which radio may be said to be not (or not just) blind but para-visual, invisible, or even visual.

In *Understanding Radio*, Andrew Crisell gives voice to what could perhaps be described as the commonsensical view: 'What strikes everyone [...] about radio is

that it is a *blind* medium'.<sup>2</sup> Its blind nature being established, he ponders on radio's crippling disadvantages – such as the lack of visual input and the high 'risks of ambiguity or complete communication failure' – and argues that 'in all kinds of radio much effort is expended on overcoming the limitations of the medium'.<sup>3</sup> To be fair, Crisell also addresses the advantages of blindness, namely the fact that it fosters 'suggestiveness and flexibility'.<sup>4</sup> However, even these positive points have their counterpoints: 'we are free – forced – to imagine everything', and poorly at that, since 'words can never be as exhaustive or specific as a visual image'.<sup>5</sup>

Imputing visual impairment to radio is by no means uncommon,<sup>6</sup> but it is rarely done in so gloomy a fashion. In Rudolf Arnheim's influential treatise of 1936 *Radio*, the 'blindness of wireless'<sup>7</sup> is very much taken for granted, as demonstrated by his chapter 'In Praise of Blindness'. As that very title suggests, however, such a state of affairs is seen by Arnheim as a boon, not as doom: 'The wireless play is self-sufficient, completes itself in the aural'.<sup>8</sup> Radio may seem to be 'much more sensorily

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<sup>2</sup> *Understanding Radio*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3

(original emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Richard Hand and Mary Traynor, *The Radio Drama Handbook: Audio Drama in Context and Practice* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Radio*, trans. by Margaret Ludwig and Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

defective and incomplete than the other arts’, but any attempt to ‘supplement’ it visually is a mistake;<sup>9</sup> indeed, Arnheim calls for ‘a mastery of the limitations of the aural’ which includes an active discouragement of the listener’s imaginative process and visualization with the mind’s eye.<sup>10</sup> As Elissa Guralnick notes, Arnheim’s ‘fundamentalism’ on this particular matter, though it ‘has found few adherents among either playwrights or listeners’, remains nevertheless an intriguing line of reasoning.<sup>11</sup>

In his 1959 book *The Art of Radio*, Donald McWhinnie is much more enthusiastic about the role that the imagination can fulfil in our appreciation of radio art, providing a ‘world of visual detail [...] of limitless dimension’.<sup>12</sup> In fact, according to him, ‘Sound Radio can be richer in vivid pictorial quality than the most elaborate settings in the patently visual media’.<sup>13</sup> It is such an imaginative vision that is behind McWhinnie’s use of quotation marks when he speaks of ‘the “blind” medium of Sound Radio’,<sup>14</sup> yet that sort of qualification is already a noteworthy inflection – indeed, his prescient use of the adjective ‘invisible’ to describe the experience of radio<sup>15</sup> indicates a more nuanced take on the topic of the visual in radio, one that is arguably more accepted nowadays than the idea of ‘blindness’. Thus in the 1980s some critics were making the case for the perception of radio as a para-visual

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 135, 172.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 136, 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Sight Unseen: Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard, and Other Contemporary Dramatists on Radio* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996), p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> *The Art of Radio* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959) p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

medium, one whose presented reality can be ‘visually apprehended’<sup>16</sup> while ‘in one sense’ being ‘completely nonvisual’.<sup>17</sup> By the 1990s, considering radio to be ‘powerfully visual’ in its own way was such a widely held belief that Guralnick terms it a ‘near universal preconception’, one which some radio writers went to great lengths to either confirm or challenge.<sup>18</sup>

Others have criticized the blindness paradigm more explicitly. Tim Crook, one of its most vocal detractors, deems that ‘radio cannot be defined as a purely “blind medium”’ because that ‘implies that the radio medium is handicapped by some kind of limited or disabled method of communication’.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa propose to describe radio as being ‘invisible’ – instead of ‘blind’, which is ‘bluntly negative’ – or even ‘visual’, without much in the way of a caveat.<sup>20</sup> Richard Hand and Mary Traynor even go as far as to claim that ‘radio is potentially the most *visual* medium of all’.<sup>21</sup> The suggestion that there is little ‘philosophical difference between seeing physically with the eye and seeing with the mind’<sup>22</sup> underlies many of these arguments.

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<sup>16</sup> John Drakakis, ‘Introduction’, in *British Radio Drama*, ed. by John Drakakis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-36 (p. 6).

<sup>17</sup> Peter Lewis, ‘Introduction’, in *Radio Drama*, ed. by Peter Lewis (New York: Longman, 1981), pp. 1-11 (p. 9).

<sup>18</sup> *Sight Unseen*, p. xii.

<sup>19</sup> *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Chignell, *Key Concepts in Radio Studies* (London: Sage, 2009), pp. 69-70.

<sup>21</sup> *The Radio Drama Handbook*, p. 34 (original emphasis).

<sup>22</sup> Crook, *Radio Drama*, p. 53.

This ongoing theoretical discussion has been enriched by an impressive variety of opinions and arguments, but it is interesting to note what they all have in common: be the medium blind, para-visual, visual, or even invisible, the assumption remains that the voices come from somewhere, they are articulated by somebody, which is the same as saying ‘some body’. When something is invisible, or when we are blind to something, it means only that the source of sound is hidden from sight or otherwise unable to be properly registered by our vision, not that there is no source in the first place. Alternatively, alleging that radio is visual implies that we conjure the unseen materiality of the radio work ourselves, or perhaps that the sounds themselves impose it upon us through sheer sonic force. Either way, the material world as such is not fundamentally at stake.

## 2. Radio as Non-Embodied

When looking at radio through less technical lenses and musing on its aesthetic potential as an art form, however, many of the same commentators choose to emphasize its ethereal and immaterial quality instead. It is said of the early days of wireless that it must have ‘struck many as a type of “soul machine”, a mystical device that seeded the ether with disembodied voices and spectral presences’.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, this ‘miraculous’ new medium often lent itself to associations with the fantastic, the occult, and telepathy: the ‘mystic powers’ attributed to it ‘permeated nineteenth-century thought’<sup>24</sup> and beyond.<sup>25</sup> It may not be the only medium to invite

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, ‘Wireless Ego: The Pulp Physics of Psychoanalysis’, in *Broadcasting Modernism*, ed. by Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 31-50 (p. 32).

<sup>24</sup> Gaby Hartel, ‘Emerging Out of a Silent Void: Some Reverberations of Rudolf

discussion on issues of non-embodiment, but its early and seismic impact on popular culture caused radio in particular and aural art in general to be particularly susceptible to such musings; thus ‘the disembodied effects of new media technologies’ have come to be dominant in reflections on audio,<sup>26</sup> likely inspired by ‘Edison’s influential view of recording’, which stressed ‘the ghostly character of the recorded voice and its occult powers’.<sup>27</sup>

This is especially clear in the first treatises on radio – which also happen to have been among the most influential, as they were written during or shortly before the heyday of radio art. Arnheim suggests that radio plays are populated by ‘disembodied figures’ and ‘pure voices which have no other place in any earthly scene or action’; in the airwaves ‘everything is lacking’, objects are replaced by actions, and, when the ‘sound-world’ is effective, it alone suffices, ‘without any recollection of the “missing” corporeal world’.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, when McWhinnie observes that radio exists in time but not in space (the best it can do is ‘to create the illusion’ of space),<sup>29</sup> the implication is that the medium is irremediably immaterial. Indeed, since radio can often be perceived as a ‘voice coming out of the dark’, for McWhinnie one of its

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Arnheim’s Radio Theory in Beckett’s Radio Pieces’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 19 (2010), 218-227 (pp. 222, 221).

<sup>25</sup> Sconce, ‘Wireless Ego’, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Emilie Morin, ‘Beckett’s Speaking Machines: Sound, Radiophonics and Acousmatics’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 21 (2014), 1-24 (p. 10).

<sup>28</sup> Arnheim, *Radio*, pp. 188, 154, 194.

<sup>29</sup> Mcwhinnie, *The Art of Radio*, p. 41.

strengths is ‘its power to communicate secret states of mind, the inner world and private vision of the speaker’.<sup>30</sup>

Later thoughts on aurality in general and radiophony in particular would chime with these postulations. In line with Arnheim, Everett Frost argues that radio allows for ‘sounded verbalisation without visual, external referentiality’ and ‘is ideally suited for dramatising disembodied voices’.<sup>31</sup> Many scholars prefer to focus on the medium’s perceived natural drive towards interiority: for instance, Mark Cory sees radio as ideally suited for ‘[t]he existential quest invited by the suspension of external reality and the unmasking of an inner self’.<sup>32</sup> However, it is not uncommon to come across arguments for an interpretation of radio as actually bodiless (further instances of this paradigm will be analysed later on, when the critical response to Beckett’s work for radio is discussed). This view is perhaps best summed up in Guralnick’s claim that in radio reality becomes ‘an act of the mind’, as ‘radio inclines us to favour the action of the mind above the actuality of matter’.<sup>33</sup> Equally significantly, radio has been seen not just as synonymous with non-embodiment but actually as an actively disembodied force. Writing on Artaud’s controversial (and for that reason not broadcast) radio piece *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*, Allen Weiss alerts his

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 61, 57.

<sup>31</sup> “‘The Sound Is Enough’: Beckett’s Radio Plays’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 251-65 (p. 253).

<sup>32</sup> ‘Soundplay: The Polyphonous Tradition of German Radio Art’, in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Douglas Khan and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 331-71 (p. 351).

<sup>33</sup> *Sight Unseen*, pp. 99, 100.



reader to the ‘ontological risk’ of recording the voice: ‘the recorded voice is the stolen voice that returns to me as the hallucinatory presence of the voice of another’; this ‘disincarnate voice’ is thus othered, which causes ‘the radiophonic work to return as hallucination and phantasm’.<sup>34</sup>

Often, then, material objects, the physiological body in particular, and even outer reality in general are considered to be more or less absent from radio. The notion of non-embodiment keeps cropping up, explicitly or indirectly, in the relatively meagre critical discourse available on radio as an art form.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that much

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Radio, Death, and the Devil: Artaud’s *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*’, in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 269-307 (pp. 300, 301).

<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that aurality as a whole has been systematically overlooked – in fact, the research output of sound studies in the twenty-first century shows that the opposite is true. The neglect of aurality in artistic practice noted in 1992 by Douglas Khan in his introduction to *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* has been satisfactorily redressed in the decades since, and the burgeoning field of sound studies has provided much-needed theoretical fodder to analyse said practice. For examples of recent works on the subject, see Lynne Kendrick, *Theatre Aurality* (London: Palgrave, 2017) and Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013). Nevertheless, the fact is that Gregory Whitehead’s plaint, formulated in his article from the same anthology, concerning the dearth of scholarly discourse on radio specifically (‘Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art’, pp. 253-63 (p. 253)) – one that concurs with many similar assessments in the early 1980s, such as Lewis’s (‘Introduction’ to *Radio Drama*, p. 2) and Drakakis’s (‘Introduction’ to

of radio art is frequently interpreted as a complex encapsulation and articulation of, or the striving towards, the perfect Cartesian self: the mind unencumbered by the body. It is relevant to point out that, though in academic circles Cartesian dualism may be dismissed as something of a philosophical relic, the mind/body dualism is ‘deeply embedded in our philosophical and religious traditions’, and that in everyday life we constantly fall prey to its undeniable appeal and are complicit in its perpetuation, despite whatever we may rationally think about it<sup>36</sup> (this too will be discussed again later on).

So scholarly discourse on radio is often tangled in the web of paradox when it comes to the concept of embodiment. Technically, it is at least tacitly acknowledged, all voices must issue from a body; from that particular perspective, it matters little whether radio is a blind, visual, para-visual, or invisible medium, because materiality itself is never really in doubt – in a way it is even implied in terms like ‘invisibility’. However, the assumption of a grounded reality is seriously undercut by claims of radio art being often made up of ‘disembodied figures’, ‘disembodied voices’, and ‘pure voices’ (notice the moral connotations of that recurrent attribute), which inhabit an ‘inner world’ bereft of ‘external referentiality’, and therefore verging on a solipsistic worldview (pardon the oxymoron) where mind alone matters (and here pardon the pun).

The idea here is not to suggest that these critics have made a critical blunder of some sort, or that there be an outright contradiction in terms, or that either perspective be completely correct or completely misguided. The purpose of these two sections on

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*British Radio Drama*, p. 18) – remains all too relevant 25 years on.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 2.

radio is no more, and no less, than to give expression to an essential tension inherent in the medium, one that has been explored by the radio writers mentioned in this article as well as many others. And there are few thematic tropes more inviting for questions on embodiment in radio than old age.

### 3. Old Age: A Mystifying Silence

As far as old age is concerned, hopefully there is no need to reiterate here what has been demonstrated at length elsewhere, namely that it was largely overlooked by philosophers – and, later, by scientists – for centuries.<sup>37</sup> The tide is turning, to be sure; unlike critical discourse on radio art – whose condition has always been rather precarious<sup>38</sup> and whose outlook is darkened by the diminishing contemporary relevance of the medium – the academic field of age studies is thriving like never before. Of all the noteworthy works that could be listed, *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Ageing*, edited by Geoffrey Scarre,<sup>39</sup> a first-rate collection of articles dealing with the possible meanings of old age and the process of ageing that was published as recently as last year, deserves to be highlighted.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See for example Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1. It bears mentioning that Small, going further than most of her peers, argues that there are ‘good reasons’ for that neglect (see p. 6).

<sup>38</sup> McWhinnie, *The Art of Radio*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>39</sup> *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Ageing* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> The review of literature related to age studies is here on the light side because I have written on the subject more thoroughly elsewhere: see Pedro Querido, ‘Considering Old Age and the Absurd in Harold Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*’, *Harold Pinter Review*, 2 (2018), 59-81. For thoughts on old age as a concept and the perils of

Yet while the concepts of ageing and old age have accrued greater interest and currency in literary and philosophical studies, it remains true that their importance continues to be overlooked in areas where one would expect them to be eminently pertinent. For instance, Helen Small comments on the ‘striking’ lack of interest in old age ‘in texts that are principally about temporality’, such as Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.<sup>41</sup> An even more clear-cut example would be a recent and accomplished overview on temporality, David Hoy’s *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality*, from which ageing is entirely absent.<sup>42</sup> This merely corroborates the by now more or less unanimous thesis that historically speaking old age has not been deemed relevant enough when discussing subject areas as inexorably linked to it as the concept of ‘lived time’.

Similarly, all too often the more recent concept of embodiment is expounded on without taking due stock of the ageing process, even though that process is so vital to one’s dealings with one’s own body in particular and one’s attempts at meaning-making in general. To give but one example of this, Mark Johnson’s insightful *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, while addressing all manner of crucial problems, challenging many common misconceptions concerning the body and proposing to look at meaning, reason, and even spirituality as

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presuming it to be a coherent monolith, see pages pp. 60-61. For an appraisal of different approaches to old age (from both chronometric and ‘lived time’ perspectives) as applied in particular to Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*, see pp. 63-70. For an exploration of why the correlation between old age and intersubjectivity issues might be an especially apt theme for radio art, see pp. 70-76.

<sup>41</sup> *The Long Life*, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> *The Time of Our Lives* (London, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

‘embodied’,<sup>43</sup> fails to identify ageing and its corollary changes as an important element of the ‘embodied mind’ equation.

This is not to imply that these studies are deficient because of this, or indeed that all research on any subject liable to be related to old age must take it into account. What is suggested here is simply that this is further evidence that old age, although always a universal possibility and especially as of late an increasingly likely reality, has taken its time to generate critical interest in a way that is remotely comparable to the consistency with which it has been thematized in the arts throughout millennia.<sup>44</sup>

This means that many worthwhile subjects related to ageing in literature, drama, and philosophy are yet to be properly examined. Consider, for example, the thematization of old age in radio plays. In his monograph on ageing in performance arts, Michael Mangan relates his surprise at finding radio to ‘be an important medium for the subject matter’.<sup>45</sup> However, almost everything remains to be written on this particular affinity. Occasionally we may find cursory remarks on radio’s special ability to navigate the tricky waters of ageing, such as when Ian Rodger deems Armand Salacrou’s stage play *The Unknown Woman of Arras* to be ‘more suited to radio’ in part because of its ‘presentation of the friend of Ulysses at different ages’,<sup>46</sup> but in-depth surveys on this particular correlation are much harder to come by.

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<sup>43</sup> See for example Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, pp. 279-81.

<sup>44</sup> For a competent diachronic survey of the latter phenomenon, see *A History of Old Age*, ed. by Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline* (Bristol, Chicago: Intellect, 2013), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Radio Drama* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), p. 126.

One interesting case study is Guralnick's *Sight Unseen*, a study of radio drama which features thought-provoking analyses of work written for radio by Beckett, Pinter, and Stoppard, among others. She notes the importance of the theme of age in Robert Ferguson's *Transfigured Night* and in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (a work that, despite being a stage play, draws heavily on the medium of radio and audio technologies in general), as well as in the latter playwright's *Embers*, *All That Fall* and *Words and Music*.<sup>47</sup> And yet ageing is not explicitly identified as a legitimate link between these works. Even more strikingly, a whole chapter is dedicated to the joint reading of Arthur Kopit's *Wings* and Pinter's *A Slight Ache*, but one of the themes that most glaringly bridges the two works – ageing and its potential deleterious effects on body and mind – is not discussed at any length.

Although radio's intriguing aptness for handling the intricate nexus of issues clustered around old age may not have been seized upon by critics, the same is certainly not true of the radio practitioners themselves. What follows is a brief synopsis of each of the four works that make up this article's corpus (Pinget's *La Manivelle*, Pinter's *A Slight Ache*, Beckett's *Embers*, and Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase*),<sup>48</sup> which will be looked at again in the next section.

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<sup>47</sup> *Sight Unseen*, pp. 79, 84, 89.

<sup>48</sup> The writers were chosen for being contemporary, likeminded (as attested by the number of works in which they are read together, such as Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* and Guralnick's *Sight Unseen*), and therefore radio practitioners who influenced and sometimes interacted with one another (Beckett clearly being the prime point of convergence). The radio pieces themselves were chosen due to their similar ethos as works written for and seeking to probe the boundaries of radio, as well as their meaningful (because deliberate, that is, not merely accidental)

Our first example is Pinget's *La Manivelle*, known today in the English-speaking world thanks to Samuel Beckett's free translation (some have called it an adaptation, but that implies a clear overestimation of Beckett's input), *The Old Tune*. In Pinget's radio work, two old friends, Toupin and Pommard, meet again after many years and reminisce about the old days. As they trade pleasantries and (mis)remember the past, they struggle to hear each other due to the noise of the cars passing by. Meanwhile, Toupin's barrel-organ plays 'the old tune'; it constantly jams, and in the end the commotion of the modern world threatens to engulf its melody, but ultimately the barrel-organ wins the day.<sup>49</sup> The old men depicted in *La Manivelle* are as conventional (indeed stereotypical) as can be: affable, conservative and forgetful, prone to look back with fondness and to complain sourly that the young no longer heed the old. Unlike the other works discussed here, however, Pinget's radio piece, though not exactly mirthful, strikes an undeniably optimistic chord, epitomized by the rickety old tune that makes itself heard against stern odds.

Radio's suitability to resort unabashedly, and even to great effect, to explicit symbols – in a way that would be awkward on the stage<sup>50</sup> – is also showcased by Pinter in *A Slight Ache*. A couple, Edward and Flora, is visited by a mysterious matchseller, whose odd, almost ineffable contours seem to defy plausible description, except for the fact that he is, as Flora is fond of stating, 'an old man'.<sup>51</sup> The

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thematization of old age.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Pinget, *La Manivelle / Lettre morte* (Paris: Minuit, 1970), p. 62. Subsequent references are given in the text, identified by the abbreviation *LM*.

<sup>50</sup> Arnheim, *Radio*, p. 181; McWhinnie, *The Art of Radio*, p. 37.

<sup>51</sup> Harold Pinter, *A Slight Ache and Other Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1982), p. 21.

Subsequent references are given in the text, identified by the abbreviation *SA*.

matchseller upsets the couple's dynamics in irreversible ways, apparently becomes younger as Edward grows feebler and older (SA, p. 39), and in the end switches places with Edward. Here too the protagonists take a walk down memory lane – rather naturally, considering that this is almost a sine qua non of works that thematize ageing; again misremembrance destabilizes the fragile edifice that is the self, though in *A Slight Ache* it has the added importance of having significant ramifications for the plot, miring it deeper in ambiguity.

The quasi- (or pseudo-?) soliloquy technique, used liberally in Pinter's radio piece, is key to Beckett's *Embers*. Henry, the aged protagonist, not only talks to himself but also addresses his father, who drowned long ago, and speaks with his wife Ada, who may very well not be there, or alive, at all. Facing the very sea that took his father's life, Henry variously evokes the past (through flashbacks, long ruminations, and possibly through a convoluted, unfinished story) in an attempt to come to terms with it. But while he hesitates to follow in the footsteps of his father, he also hesitates to move on and leave the shore for good. So he reminisces without drawing definitive conclusions, and tells stories without ending them; his mind must be in flux for his body to remain static.

The kind of uncertainty that permeates *A Slight Ache* and *Embers* is the very crux of Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* (hereafter *Artist*). Martello, Beauchamp, and Donner are three ageing artist friends who live together, but the radio work begins with Donner's death from falling down the stairs. The incident is caught on a tape recorder, and Martello and Beauchamp blame each other for their friend's demise. As they wonder about Donner's recent broodiness, a series of flashbacks progressively takes the action back to their green avant-garde years and then progressively returns it to its starting point. These jolts in time acquaint us with the



story behind Donner's bitter remorse: one of the three friends wins favour at first sight with Sophie (a girl who soon after becomes blind). Together, they conclude that it must have been Beauchamp, but much later Donner learns that in fact it was most likely him who had caught Sophie's eye. In the last moments of *Artist*, the listener is induced to believe that Donner's untimely end (met also by Sophie long ago, as she too fell to her death) might have been nothing more than the unfortunate consequence of his attempt to swat a fly.

As in the previously mentioned works, failing memories make an appearance, mostly for comic effect – though here the tricks played by memory play second fiddle to those perpetrated by the senses. In this thoroughgoing, perhaps ambivalent but certainly tongue-in-cheek homage to the artist and polymath Marcel Duchamp, Stoppard seeks to expose the fallibility of sight and hearing as well as of cognition; the perplexing amalgam of defective sensory information creates riddles which are left unsolved (and are in a way unsolvable). *Artist*, then, is more than a playful exposé of our susceptibility to optical and auditory illusions: it is a work of 'pure paradox', and part both of its humorous appeal and philosophical interest lies in its radical brand of scepticism.<sup>52</sup>

Having established that all of these works thematize old age in one way or another, in the following section another common thread, also already discernible throughout these summaries, will be dissected: epistemological scepticism.

#### 4. Scepticism: A Roadmap to Non-Embodiment?

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<sup>52</sup> Guralnick, *Sight Unseen*, p. 52. This point is painstakingly evinced by Guralnick in her excellent chapter on *Artist*: *ibid.*, pp. 29-52.

Before we look into how the works examined in this article are infused with that philosophical notion, it is important to clarify what is meant here by the term ‘scepticism’. As a school of thought, it originated in Ancient Greece, but scepticism ‘in the most common sense’ – ‘the refusal to grant that there is any knowledge or justification’<sup>53</sup> – is a far cry from the original sceptics’ worldview, and they would likely have seen such a doctrine ‘as a variety of “negative dogmatism”’.<sup>54</sup> Instead, the Greek sceptics cultivated a Socratic ‘epistemic modesty’<sup>55</sup> and ‘resisted with equal force the urge to assert philosophical generalizations, and the urge to deny them’.<sup>56</sup> While we will not dwell on this fairly specific sense of scepticism, it is worth mentioning if only because, as this article will argue, it too is in a way applicable to the artistic works analysed here.

In fact, it is ‘methodological’ scepticism – ‘a main force, perhaps *the* main force, in the broad sweep of Western philosophy from Descartes through Hegel’<sup>57</sup> – that we will be focusing on, because it informs the corpus of this article, and therefore my own readings of the texts. This ‘Modern Skepticism’ that we ascribe to philosophers such as René Descartes and David Hume<sup>58</sup> could theoretically prepare

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<sup>53</sup> Ernest Sosa, ‘Skepticism’, in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 988-91 (p. 988).

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 195.

<sup>55</sup> Sosa, ‘Skepticism’, p. 988.

<sup>56</sup> Toulmin, *Return to Reason*, p. 195.

<sup>57</sup> Sosa, ‘Skepticism’, p. 989 (original emphasis).

<sup>58</sup> Toulmin, *Return to Reason*, p. 195.

the ground for a dualist aesthetics of non-embodiment: going down the rabbit hole of epistemological scepticism, one might conclude that if our sensory perception (that is, ‘the body’) is imperfect, then we should not trust it as a source of information, and that therefore reason and logic alone (that is, ‘the mind’) can be relied on.

Is that the telos of the works in this article’s corpus? We will discuss that possibility in the last section; for the time being, it is safe to put forward that one of the aspects that they do have in common – besides the thematization of old age and the familiar trope of failing memories – is precisely the underlying negative force of epistemological uncertainty.

Pinget’s *La Manivelle*, for instance, raises that uncertainty to the level of organizing principle. Only when Toupin and Pommard report on their family members’ living status, health, or current employment, or when the two aged characters concur on stereotypical ‘grumpy old man’ opinions,<sup>59</sup> is there a faint resemblance to solid epistemological ground. Otherwise, the listener is left wondering what if anything can factually be salvaged from the ravages of Time on the memories of these two old friends. They remember things differently on a number of details of their common past, such as the maker of the first car they saw, the time when the rubber hose became widely used, the year of the great frost, and even the army division that they served in (*LM*, pp. 16, 18, 48-50, 28).

These may seem to be little more than trivia of scant importance, but actually, as Pommard says concerning an entanglement of different kinds of legal cases, factual accuracy makes ‘a power of difference’ (*LM*, p. 35). If Toupin forgets not only important events that happened twenty years ago, such as the death of Madame Pommard, but also things that Pommard told him minutes ago (*LM*, pp. 38-40), the

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<sup>59</sup> See for example Pinget, *LM*, pp. 12, 38, 22, 36.

listener to the radio piece is likely to wonder about the veracity of virtually everything else he (mis)remembers; it casts the shadow of doubt over seemingly innocuous and otherwise perfectly believable claims. Even Pommard, apparently the one with the keener powers of recall of the two, does not emerge unscathed from the havoc wreaked by doubt. Although Pommard accuses his daughter of having hidden the cigarettes, sure enough, they immediately turn up (*LM*, p. 24). He then notices that his lighter is missing, and that too he pegs on his daughter's well-intentioned mischief (*LM*, p. 26). But since he was obviously wrong about the cigarettes, why should we now trust his claim?

While Pinget dramatizes the folly of faulty memories in *La Manivelle*, in their radio works Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard toy not only with the unreliability of reminiscence but also with the data obtained from our more immediate senses. So for example in Pinter's *A Slight Ache* the enigmatic (and relatively untrustworthy) recollections of Edward and Flora are paired with their equally enigmatic (and untrustworthy) descriptions of the physical appearance of the matchseller. He is variously likened to a 'bullock', 'jelly', or 'a solid old boy [...]'. Not at all like a jelly' (*SA*, pp. 17, 29, 32). The only thing they seem to agree on is that he is 'old' – Flora uses that epithet to characterize him as many as 10 times – but even that seems to change towards the end (*SA*, p. 39). The matchseller is something of an ineffable entity, and that is part of the reason why so many commentators see this work as ineluctably bound to its original medium, that of radio.<sup>60</sup> But the matchseller is not the

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<sup>60</sup> See for example Guralnick, *Sight Unseen*, pp. 101-02; Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, p. 160; Lewis, 'Introduction' to *Radio Drama*, p. 5. For the opposite argument, see Jacob Stulberg, 'How (Not) to Write Broadcast Plays: Pinter and the BBC', *Modern Drama*, 58 (2015), 502-23 (pp. 508, 516). For Pinter's own doubts

only element that calls for a sceptical stance: the whole work itself can be and has been described as consisting of ‘unresolved image[s]’ floating about in a precarious sound-world, and for that reason ‘*A Slight Ache* keeps its listener wary’ of crafting any certainty based on such flawed evidence.<sup>61</sup>

If in *A Slight Ache* the matchseller is more a symbol than an actual person, in *Embers* Beckett capitalizes on radio’s perceived affinity with otherworldly phenomena and shows its potential for disembodiment (as opposed to non-embodiment). The case in point is Henry’s wife, Ada, whose actual physical presence (that is also to suggest, whose existence in the realm of the living) is very much in doubt, since her supposed movement does not cause the shingle to slither the way Henry’s does.<sup>62</sup> This is analogous to how, in the BBC radio production of *A Slight Ache*, ‘the Matchseller’s dimensionality is not revealed. He never speaks, and even though he makes various movements, the resulting sound effects may be construed by the listener as having another source’.<sup>63</sup> As in Pinter’s work, in *Embers* the listener is encouraged to treat the voices that emanate from the transmitter as though they were whispered by Descartes’s famous demon itself. This has prompted many readings of Ada and Addie as ‘revenants’, and of Henry as a ‘soliloquist and solipsist’,<sup>64</sup> himself

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concerning the materialization of the matchseller on the stage, see Martin Regal, *Harold Pinter: A Question of Timing* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> Stulberg, ‘Pinter and the BBC’, p. 512.

<sup>62</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 257.

<sup>63</sup> Regal, *Harold Pinter*, p. 39.

<sup>64</sup> Clas Zilliacus, *Beckett and Broadcasting: A Study of the Works of Samuel Beckett for and in Radio and Television* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1976), pp. 81, 77.

something of a non-embodied mind roaming despairingly in an inner, self-sufficient microcosm of his own making, an interpretation that lends itself particularly well to Cartesian readings.<sup>65</sup>

Yet of all the works examined here, Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* remains the most dedicated effort to thematize epistemological scepticism. This issue has already been broached earlier in this article (in the synopsis of *Artist*), and that insight will now be complemented with a comment on the work of *Artist*'s main muse, Duchamp. His readymade *With Hidden Noise* consisted of a box with an unknown object inside, unknown even to Duchamp himself, which means that the noise it produced, 'in some ironic sense, could not be seen'.<sup>66</sup> Hiding the source of a given sound, then, is equivalent to an auditory illusion – this is what Pierre Schaeffer would term 'acousmatics', that is, 'a reduced listening that would bracket sounds from their musical and cultural origin and focus listening on sounds "in themselves" without recourse to their visual or material source'.<sup>67</sup> The ultimate point of this and other works and techniques, as Craig Adcock notes, was 'that any sense of epistemological surety is illusionary': '[w]hat we are left with in Duchamp's art is an abiding sense of doubt'.<sup>68</sup> Such doubtfulness will seep through not only our intuitive reception of Duchamp's work but also the listening experience of *Artist*, with all of its auditory fireworks and riddles.

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<sup>65</sup> Frost, 'Beckett's Radio Plays', pp. 257-58.

<sup>66</sup> Craig Adcock, 'Marcel Duchamp's Gap Music: Operations in the Space Between Art and Noise', in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 105-38 (p. 119).

<sup>67</sup> Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> 'Marcel Duchamp's Gap Music', pp. 126, 128.

Indeed, by now it is clear that the phrase ‘an abiding sense of doubt’ neatly encapsulates one of the most significant reactions elicited by each of the works considered in this article. If Toupin’s and Pommard’s accounts cancel each other out so often, what actually remains? If Flora and Edward perceive the matchseller in such disparate ways, who or what can he be exactly? If we can hear Ada’s voice but not her body’s interactions with its space, is she really there? If the answers to the enigmas in *Artist* hinge upon the correct interpretation of two kinds of illusions by fallible and enfeebled senses, can they ever be teased out of their befuddling shroud? The same answer applies to all of these and other possible queries: who knows? Doubt stands alone. Bereft of certainties, all we have left are fragments of an imagined past (the contradictory memories in *La Manivelle*); cherished illusions and delusions (maybe Flora’s, but definitely Edward’s, muddled recollections in *A Slight Ache*); fictional narratives with no prospect of ever coming up with a proper ending (the unfinished story in *Embers*); or perhaps a sort of jaunty relativism (implicit in the Dadaist views on art expressed by the protagonists of *Artist*).

It is clear, then, that epistemological scepticism, alongside the medium of radio, the idea of non-embodiment, and the theme of old age, is a major factor in all of these works.<sup>69</sup> It would now be worthwhile, therefore, to consider how these four key elements elicit and inform one another.

##### 5. Epistemological Scepticism, the Medium of Radio, Old Age, and Non-Embodiment

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<sup>69</sup> It is worth mentioning, in a nod to many influential critics’ analyses of these works, that the ‘philosophical perception of the absurd resembles epistemological skepticism’ (see Thomas Nagel, ‘The Absurd’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1971), 716-27 (p. 722)).

Radio's affinity with notions of non- and disembodiment has already been discussed, and the aural medium's very peculiar relationship with epistemological scepticism only strengthens it. On the one hand, it is true that 'the willing desire to suspend disbelief' has been deemed a defining attitude towards radio<sup>70</sup> – in fact, McWhinnie finds it essential that radio performances 'compel attention and belief', because, so he believes, in radio 'it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceal insincerity or false motivation', since 'nothing is more patent than falsehood' for the discerning ear.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, however, radio is also routinely associated with 'ambiguity', 'uncertainty', 'indeterminacy', and 'skepticism'.<sup>72</sup> Thus radio is commonly believed to be 'the happiest of mediums' for the likes of Pinter, 'a writer

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<sup>70</sup> Crook, *Radio Drama*, p. 139.

<sup>71</sup> *The Art of Radio*, pp. 182, 59.

<sup>72</sup> Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, p. 5; Catherine Laws, 'Imagining Radio Sound: Interference and Collaboration in the BBC Radio Production of Beckett's *All That Fall*', in *Samuel Beckett and BBC Radio: A Reassessment*, ed. by David Addyman, Matthew Feldman, and Erik Tønning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 103-38 (p. 131); Guralnick, *Sight Unseen*, p. 101. For reasons similar to those evoked in footnote 69, many commentators see a link between the concept of absurdity and the medium of radio. This is why Terry Hodgson does not find it 'surprising that so-called absurdist writers were drawn to radio', and he goes on to explicitly cite Beckett, Pinter, and Stoppard as examples (see *The Plays of Tom Stoppard for Stage, Radio, TV and Film: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Cambridge: Icon, 2001), p. 28; see also Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, p. 160; Crook, *Radio Drama*, p. 72; *Radio Drama*, ed. by Peter Lewis; David Pownall, *Sound Theatre: Thoughts on the Radio Play* (London: Oberon Books, 2012).



who questioned verifiable certainties',<sup>73</sup> or of Beckett, whose well-known aversion to the positive statement<sup>74</sup> would find an understated haven in the opacity of the hidden objects of radio art, like Dan's dropped item in the Irish writer's first radio work *All That Fall*, which must remain unidentifiable<sup>75</sup> and is therefore a vital part of what has been considered 'one of Beckett's more tantalizing riddles'.<sup>76</sup> What this means is that radio art, through the erosion of confidence in the precision of human language, senses, and memories, often calls upon its listeners to question not only the possibility of real intersubjectivity between the characters and of their interaction with their environment but also the very materiality of its imagined worlds.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 95.

<sup>74</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 60.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Van Laan, 'All That Fall as "a Play for Radio"', *Modern Drama*, 28 (1985), 38-47 (p. 45).

<sup>76</sup> Zilliacus, *Beckett and Broadcasting*, p. 33.

<sup>77</sup> This aspect is particularly evocative of a key proposition of philosophical scepticism: 'the philosophical skeptic challenges our ordinary assumption that there is evidence available that can help us to discriminate between the real world and some counterfeit world that appears in all ways to be identical to the real world' (see Peter Klein, 'Skepticism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), ed. by Edward Zalta, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/skepticism/>> [accessed 18 September 2018]). The thematization of scepticism in these works does not merely call into question reality and our relationship with it; perversely, the uneasiness that derives from the precariousness of what we take to be tangible and true in the 'real'

For this reason, at least in the works alluded to here, radio art can be said to aspire to, or at least contemplate the possibility of achieving, the condition of ethereality, not only because of the evanescence of sound, which dissipates as soon as it is heard, but also because of the eerie feeling of unreality instigated by the bodiless voices ‘coming out of the dark’. Thus while in *Embers* the sea and the shingle give expression to external reality throughout the piece, the voices of the departed are indistinguishable from those emanating from flesh and blood; in *A Slight Ache* Edward and the matchseller do appear to go through momentous bodily changes, but they seemingly age or rejuvenate in a matter of minutes, not being constrained by the universal laws of physics; and, as far as acoustic happenings go, the lethal tumble down the stairs in *Artist* may be as evocative of the material world as can be conceived, but voices and sounds played by machines are elsewhere in that work presented as indistinguishable from live ones, thereby potentially casting doubt on *all* voices and sounds. Even *La Manivelle*, where the material world slowly begins to foist itself upon the characters who increasingly struggle to hear each other, ends with the recording of an old tune triumphantly smothering the roaring of the moving cars.

Within this framework of epistemological scepticism and gestures towards non-embodiment, the thematization of old age makes perfect sense. Helen Small very accurately remarks that ‘representations of old age are rarely “just” about old age’.<sup>78</sup> In the works referred to in this article, it is clear that ageing is seized upon less for qualities that might be deemed inherent to it than for its symbolic and associative potential. In other words, it is a useful trope due to its rich (and mostly negative)

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world is compounded by the precariousness of the imagined worlds as well.

<sup>78</sup> *The Long Life*, p. 6.

connotations, which are tapped into the better to illustrate particular points or convey a particular tone.

For example, let us consider these works' less-than-cheerful take on temporality. While the future is by definition phenomenologically and epistemologically out of reach, and the past on both accounts recedes from us like water from Tantalus (having already been experienced and being strictly speaking inaccessible due to the limitations of human memory), the present is shown to be distorted by the smeared lenses of our senses: we may hear voices that are probably not actually there (*Embers*), or see someone whose bodily changes defy the laws of nature (*A Slight Ache*), or both see and hear things whose basic essence will never be able to be properly verified (*Artist*). What happens in these and many other works, rightly or wrongly, is that old age is seized on as a byword for metaphysical insecurity and diminishing cognitive functions; thus using aged characters drives this Weltanschauung home in a much more poignant and forceful manner.

Resorting to the thematization of old age can also be explained by its intimate connection with issues of embodiment. A rationalist outlook, such as one informed by Cartesian scepticism, leads to the repudiation of the frail, ageing body, because according to that perspective 'the body thwarts the projects of the self'<sup>79</sup> – however, the body's frailty is as much anathema to rationalism as it is problematic to existentialism,<sup>80</sup> as Simone de Beauvoir's ambivalent attitude towards senescence

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<sup>79</sup> Sally Gadow, 'Frailty and Strength: The Dialectic in Aging', *The Gerontologist*, 23 (1983), 144-47 (p. 145).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

indicates.<sup>81</sup> In this respect too the radio writers' choice of making the faltering, non-embodied voices old as well turns out to be far from innocent.

These works written for radio show how the medium's perceived tendency towards ethereality and non-embodiment can be exacerbated by the combination of two elements: the thematization of old age, which draws on the widespread perception of the ageing body as a material manifestation of the disagreeable and vulnerable aspects of the human condition; and the undercurrent of philosophical scepticism, which has doubt undermining, if not incinerating, all that connects us to the outer world and thus fosters a retreat into the claustrophobic confines of our own mind.

#### 6. The Irreducibility of the Body – and of Authorial Silence

This article concludes by circling back to the query left unanswered earlier; in a move that might appear to go somewhat against the grain of the line of reasoning pursued up to now, I will argue that there is no dualist aesthetics of non-embodiment at work, whereby voices divested of their bodies sing the praises of the unfettered mind. Instead, I will claim that the writers of this article's corpus use the medium of radio as a playground for ideas, and epistemological scepticism as a tool, the better to problematize conventional meanings of old age and fantasies of non-embodiment, without – following on the footsteps of the Greek sceptics – necessarily endorsing or rejecting any such hypotheses.

The notion of Cartesian dualism, hitherto mentioned only in passing, is conspicuously apt to illustrate this reasoning. Radio, as we have seen, is frequently

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<sup>81</sup> Oliver Davis, *Age Rage and Going Gently: Stories of the Senescent Subject in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (Amsterdam, New York: Faux Titre, 2006), p. 185.

deemed ‘blind’, ‘inward-looking’, and ‘disembodied’ – all traits that would seem to reveal a singular readiness to accommodate the ‘contained’, ‘bodiless’, and ‘solipsistic’ voice that is ‘the Cartesian voice of Reason’, the ‘inner voice’ of Western metaphysics that stands for a purified intellect and therefore aspires to remain ‘uncontaminated’ by the body or the atmosphere.<sup>82</sup>

Interestingly, this perspective is advanced even by those who acknowledge the oppressiveness and undesirability of such a putative state of affairs. A case in point: in his essay on Artaud’s *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*, Weiss persuasively posits that the French artist’s effort ‘failed due to the structural features of recording’: ‘his blasphemies, injunctions, and vituperations become texts for the archives; his shattered body becomes whole and normal through the effects of monaural recording’.<sup>83</sup> ‘The recording stole his voice; the radio dissimulated his body’, and thus ‘[r]ecording and radio – through a sort of sympathetic magic – entail a theft of the

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<sup>82</sup> Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, pp. 20-25. Beckett criticism proffers several examples of interpretations that are to a great extent complicit in this sort of thinking. These range from individual interpretations of a dualistic split in *Embers* whereby ‘[t]here is no automatic correspondence between body and soul’ (Zilliacus, *Beckett and Broadcasting*, p. 223), to wholesale assessments, such as Kathryn White’s assertion in her book on *Beckett and Decay* (London: Continuum, 2009) that ‘Beckett illustrates the Cartesian dualism of body and mind throughout his work’ (p. 4). As Ulrika Maude remarks, ‘[t]he first wave of Beckett scholarship, characterized by the works of critics such as Hugh Kenner and Esslin, read Beckett as a transcendental writer who subscribed to a Cartesian dualism’ – see Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Radio, Death, and the Devil’, p. 294.

voice and a disappearance of the body, a radical accentuation of the mind/body split, with its concomitant anguish'.<sup>84</sup>

The idea of the 'mind/body split', then, is not only much maligned, and even derided, but also (and sometimes even simultaneously) implicitly, and often unwittingly, lent credence. Recent philosophical thought may vigorously challenge the notion of a 'brain in a vat', which a proper adherence to methodological scepticism would seem logically to entail<sup>85</sup> – but that takes nothing away from its allure, be it as a (possibly unconscious) credo or merely as a thought experiment which serves as the cornerstone of some artistic work. That allure is demystified by Drew Leder's remarkable book on *The Absent Body*, where he shows that our intuitive embrace of Cartesian dualism is partly explained by the body's 'intrinsic tendencies toward self-concealment' – indeed, our personal embodied experience actually 'plays a crucial role in encouraging and supporting Cartesian dualism'.<sup>86</sup> Leder demonstrates that the 'kernel of truth' in mind-body dualism means that schizoid experiences of a mind that seems to stand out in detriment of body – be it contented and therefore receding into the background or else foregrounded due to what is usually a negative sensation – do indeed 'harmonize with lived experience'.<sup>87</sup> This helps 'account for its abiding power', and only once the legitimacy of its enticement is recognized 'can we break its conceptual hegemony, while simultaneously reclaiming its experiential truths', and thus 'effectively challenge mind-body dualism', which includes taking

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 295, 300.

<sup>85</sup> Sosa, 'Skepticism', p. 991.

<sup>86</sup> *The Absent Body* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 107, 125.

issue with the Western ‘tendency to identify the essential self with the incorporeal mind’.<sup>88</sup>

By turning to the famously profuse Beckett criticism, as well as to some theoretical instruments provided by the emerging sound studies, two different but related ends can be pursued: namely to puncture the idea that thematizing Cartesian dualism is tantamount to corroborating its veracity; and that toying with notions of dis- and/or non-embodiment is tantamount to establishing that radio is a ‘bodiless’ medium (and, by extension, that the workings of the mind can and perhaps even should be uncoupled from the body it springs from).

In a tendency that is also manifest in the scholarly readings of the other authors of this article’s corpus, ‘many critics have been tempted’ to see Beckett’s radio works ‘as an opportunity to focus undistractedly on the interior workings of the mind’.<sup>89</sup> This was partly abetted by Beckett’s own comments on the genesis of *All That Fall*, which seem to emphasize the ‘emergence from nothing and nowhere’ of radio content,<sup>90</sup> and so the voices that populate it become stand-ins for the ‘inner voice’ so dear to the Western philosophical tradition. A similar line of thought allows such critics to square the circle, that is, to justify the undeniably immense amount of attention given to physical and bodily (dis)functions in Beckett’s œuvre<sup>91</sup> as a way of simply setting the body apart from the mind: ‘[t]he prominence of the body and its

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 69, 3, 107, 69.

<sup>89</sup> Steven Connor, ‘I Switch Off: Beckett and the Ordeals of Radio’, in *Broadcasting Modernism*, ed. by Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), pp. 274-93 (p. 275).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>91</sup> See White, *Beckett and Decay*, passim.

decrepitude was accredited to the body's inherent otherness; what truly mattered in Beckett [according to such critics] was the mind and its capacity to move beyond matter'.<sup>92</sup>

However, this, as Ulrika Maude impeccably shows in her book *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, 'is to offer a reductive analysis of Beckett's writing': the acknowledgement of his later and 'most intricate and intense investigation into issues of embodiment' have led Beckett critics to 'now widely concur that the Beckettian characters' experience of the world is a markedly physical, bodily experience'.<sup>93</sup> Disagreeing with scholars who think of radio as 'aural, temporal, nonspatial and uncorporeal',<sup>94</sup> Maude claims, for instance, that in his first radio play Beckett uses sound to emphasize embodiment and materiality.<sup>95</sup> Steven Connor also notes how Beckett's 'bulkily bodily' work for radio causes sound to become laden with weight.<sup>96</sup>

This demonstrates that the nature of sound in general, and the medium of radio in particular, is not as straightforwardly 'ethereal' as it may appear. We may pick semantics apart trying to decide whether radio is 'visual', 'para-visual', 'blind', or 'invisible', but to say that it is 'bodiless' or 'immaterial' may be stretching the definition too far in a figurative direction. Radio is not immaterial: after all, 'if radio

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<sup>92</sup> *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, p. 1.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Zilliacus quoted in *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>96</sup> 'I Switch Off', p. 290. For a recent interpretation on *All That Fall* as a radio piece centred around 'visceral effect of embodied subjectivity' of 'Maddy's radio body', see Jeff Porter, *Lost Sound, The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).



does appear to come from nowhere, it can never in fact do so [...] without any material intermediary or apparatus'.<sup>97</sup> The myth of radio as 'an immaterial art', which was fuelled by the rise of secondariness (that is, the fact that 'listening became an ever more diffuse and involuntary activity'), has feet of clay.<sup>98</sup> What is more, even when 'sound's integrity is eviscerated through recording, sound's materiality [...] provides a firewall against complete atomization', since 'sound and the body' are connected 'through the figure of vibration'.<sup>99</sup>

And neither is radio bodiless. It has been falsely claimed that Beckett invented the 'radiophonic body',<sup>100</sup> but obviously *All That Fall* was not the first work for radio to have characters puff and groan and thus to foreground their invisible bodies. Yet even the most 'purified' voice will carry 'traces of the body', not just metaphorically but in a very concrete manner, as it makes its way '[m]oving from the interior to the exterior'.<sup>101</sup> These are the prosaic truths that reveal the materiality of sound and radio, and that sustain inspired insights such as Gregory Whitehead's idea of 'the autonomous, electrified play of bodies unknown to each other' as 'the unabashed aspiration of radio art'.<sup>102</sup>

Just as instances of experimentation with notions of non-embodiment in radio, or the medium's inherent suitability to occasion such experimentation, do not mean

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>99</sup> Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, p. 143.

<sup>100</sup> Jeff Porter, 'Beckett and the Radiophonic Body: Beckett and the BBC', *Modern Drama*, 53 (2010), 431-46 (p. 438).

<sup>101</sup> Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, p. 7.

<sup>102</sup> 'Out of the Dark', p. 262.

that non-embodiment is in fact somehow achieved (or even truly desired), dabbling in depictions of Cartesian dualism does not mean that such a paradigm is representative of actual reality or even worthwhile to aim at. Once again, Beckett illustrates this point best. His fascination with Descartes is well documented,<sup>103</sup> and he had an undeniable influence in the Nobel laureate's work, but this need not signify that he explored the Frenchman's philosophy uncritically. Maude contends that 'Beckett moves away from an initial Cartesianism, especially prominent in the novel *Murphy* (1938), albeit in the form of parody, to a more complex, yet at times reluctant, abandonment of dualism'.<sup>104</sup> Even his later novels can be said to be 'Cartesian in their premises, but ironic in their method': '[a]s often with [Beckett], that which he loved was not that which he could accept', and that certainly applied to 'the premises of Cartesianism'.<sup>105</sup> In this he brings to mind the Dadaists of Berlin and New York, whose pivotal theme of 'man-as-machine' could be seen as 'upholding the Cartesian viewpoint, although tinged with an intense irony'.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Michael Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body*, p. 6.

<sup>105</sup> G. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to His Works, Life, and Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 135.

<sup>106</sup> David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 104. What is more, often the proponents of readings of Beckett from a Cartesian perspective stumble upon concepts that actually belong to the theoretical framework of embodiment. For example, White considers that in *Waiting for Godot* 'the Cartesian dualism is highlighted, as the body is in fact a

Entertaining a thought, as the maxim goes, need not imply our acceptance of it.<sup>107</sup> When Beckett, Pinter, Pinget, and Stoppard depict traits and predicaments stereotypically associated with old age, play with the conceits of non-embodiment and mind/body dualism, and show the world through the hazy lenses of epistemological scepticism, they are not subscribing to any such notions. Instead of a definitive statement on what old age is and portends, or an aesthetics of non-embodiment, or a

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degenerating vehicle that houses the, all too often, imperfect mind' (*Beckett and Decay*, p. 9). However, there is nothing dualist about that; if anything, body and mind seem to be in perfect harmony. She then claims that 'as we progress further into Beckett's work, it becomes evident that the mind itself cannot escape the process of degeneration, and similar to the body, it too becomes afflicted, as the advance of decay takes precedence over the possibility of remaining mentally articulate' (*ibid.*, p. 21). Far from evincing a Cartesian split, such a reading, which is accurate enough, shows instead a strong link between body and mind: the decay is very much one of the 'lived body'.

<sup>107</sup> In the case of Stoppard, for instance, this is particularly true: see his unequivocal defence of Donner's more conventional views on art in *Artist* (Hodgson, *The Plays of Tom Stoppard*, p. 74). As a matter of fact, when discussing *Travesties*, his later, longer, more prominent stage play drawing on the same themes and topics, Stoppard staunchly stands by Joyce and his aesthetic outlook to the detriment of Tzara and Lenin – see e.g. Paul Delaney, *Tom Stoppard: The Moral Vision of the Major Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 62-64. In short, his predilection for the thematization of chaos and scepticism is not incompatible with his personal commitment to rationality and 'his faith in man's mind' – see Victor Cahn, *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard* (London: Associated University Presses, 1979), p. 156.

sceptics' guide to life without the possibility of knowledge, all we are left with, to paraphrase an earlier quote, is an abiding sense of doubt – and it is the richness of that ambivalence that makes their work worth studying.

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