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Radio - Sound
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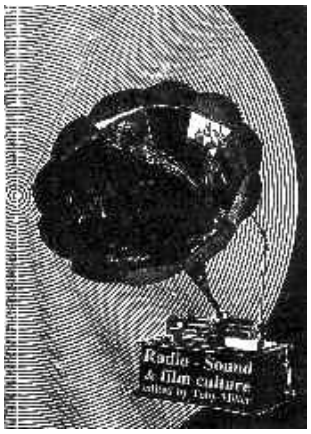

An editorial introduction for radio

Toby Miller

While he enjoys sessions behind the microphone from time to time, Senator Richardson won't be giving up his day job. 'You can't do this too often - there's a line you cross when you stop being a serious politician and getting into the realms of being frivolous, and I can't do that,' he said. (Cameron 5)

Chesterfield is merely the nation's cigarette, but the radio is the voice of the nation. (Adorno and Horkheimer 377)

Language is sought in its most authentic state: in the spoken word - the word that is dried up and frozen into immobility by writing. A whole mystique is being born: that of the verb, of the pure poetic flash that disappears without trace, leaving nothing behind it but a vibration suspended in the air for but one brief moment. (Foucault 286)

Some people leave the radio tap running all the time, and are only vaguely conscious of what is coming out of it. (Miller 183)

The field of writing on radio is neither large nor worthy. As an object for behavioural research panics, it was quickly overtaken by the advent of cinema and television. As an object of textual analysis, it was less easily recuperated archivally than more visual fields. As a casual part of everyday life, it was held to occupy less real attention than, for example, the newspaper. But radio training manuals, audiological research and governmental policy documents are now being supplemented by a literature deriving its force from textual studies, although exegetical and historical work is still sparse. As the everyday becomes a category of contestation and valorisation in cultural theory, so Eco's use of the 'radio that is turned on but not tuned' as a model example of phatic communication may even offer providential investigation at a node of cultural criticism that formerly seemed to be devoid of significant signification (164). At the same time, the medium is expanding its audience reach, and its availability as a means of production. Australians, for example, spend more time listening to the radio each week than they do watching television, and have more options for becoming actively involved in what it broadcasts. In its different forms, radio both 'speaks to the public' and 'lets the public speak' (Potts 172). It

is more than Abrams' conception of an alternative to 'the whole problem of thinking what to do' (119). From all points of the spectrum, the medium's special strength and dependency - its sound - now imposes what has been called the 'severe code of radio's discipline', a code that requires all changes in diegesis to be earmarked (Rodger 10): the language of radio is a language that decodes and encodes other sign systems as part of the aural pictures painted by its promiscuous social tourism. In this "Introduction", I want to look at how radio has been understood by a variety of theorists and the basis that provides us for treating it as an object of academic consideration. In doing so, I hope to offer a context in which the articles that follow can be read and positioned within such an act of tourism.

Raymond Williams emphasises that technological innovation typically derives from a pre-existing and determining environment of 'social relations and cultural forms'. That environment will condition the 'selection, investment and development' of these forms. To illustrate his claim, Williams seeks a point of origin and a means of definition for radio. It might be said to have begun with Hertz and the announcement of the radio wave in the late nineteenth century, a finding that depended on previous knowledge of the conduction of electricity. This stimulated a great deal of technical experimentation, born out of a search for improved telegraph or telephone systems, and encouraged by private enterprise and the armed services. Twenty years after, it was clearly possible to transmit messages via these waves over very great distances. But new developments took understandings of the possibilities and definition of radio in a different direction, to the consternation of these early sponsors, who feared either interference with their signals (in the case of communications companies) or trivialisation (in the case of governmental surveillance) (120). In 1920s China, the northern warlords monopolised the radio spectrum for military purposes. In the United States, this privilege fell to the Navy (Hazlett 135, 135n.4).But meanwhile, new corporations were emerging that sought new modes of address for the machine of entertainment in the home, modes of address and marketing that were to do with the art of reception, and hence the science of the receiver. These two differing points of stimulus continued as parallel lines of development: the radio telephone and the radio broadcast(Williams 120-21). It was radio that provided the first telephone service between Britain and Australia (three minutes for six pounds in 1930, five minutes for seven dollars and sixty-eight cents in 1991, minus the aid of radio). This was a bold move at a time when policy advisers were doubting the capacity of the public to remember five-digit numbers (Curtis and Pearcery 547, 549 and Telecom Australia 1209).

The emergence of these capacities in the realm of sound, particularly its reproducibility, was critical to the shape taken by later forms of visual media, both through the technical possibilities for synchronised sound, image relations, and the model of integrated business conglomerates which harmonised entertainment electronics through a set of industry-wide plans (Armes 10 and Edgerton). This can be seen at the level of organising the audience and the industry itself. For example, fifty years ago, American

listeners devised a method for cutting off the wireless when music ceased and talk began; hence the invention of the jingle as a countermeasure by broadcasters that may be seen to anticipate roadblocks against the remote control television devices used by the audiences of the 1980s (Miller 185n.). And at the business management level, RCA became a path-breaking conglomerate via intertwined interests in film, recording and television research that were funded - and in some sense suggested by its successes in radio (Armes 53). If film is the model of American trade in texts, radio is its model for the integrated industry of domestic entertainment culture. And it continues to have complex relations with adjacent popular cultural forms. Consider the following as a contemporary template for "synergy": in the late 1980s, MMM-FM devised a myth of itself not as the most successful station in Sydney, driven by corporate logic, but rather as a subversive radical, a media pirate. In 1989, its breakfast announcer, Doug Mulray, would sporadically appear in the midst of television commercials for the film Warlock. Following the first part of the standard advertisement, static would fill the screen, clearing to show Mulray in the studio. Responding to the surveillant eye of the audience, he pulled a lever and normal transmission resumed. As the MMM general manager described this to the Australian Financial Review, 'We're trying to create the illusion that Doug is out there with a mobile TV transmitter and he's cutting in on the ads. Doug's well-known for his anti-ads (biting send-ups of radio commercials) and the idea is that he is extending it to television commercials' . The pirate advertising breaks only interrupted the conventional Warlockpromotion two or three times a week. The promotion cost MMM nothing in air-time: the distributors of the film presumably thought it was to their advantage. There are multiple ironies to this type of parody: the anti-ads were traces from Mulray's period as an announcer with the ABC's former 2JJ, a station which he now routinely derogates in public from the moral high ground of a private company which determines for itself the difference between commercials designed to establish antiauthoritarian credibility and commercials designed to establish patterns of consumption.

Eco argues that a 'chain reaction of inventions' rendered the mass media 'genealogical' in their commonality. This quality continues to embed the real dimensions of media histories in the forgetfulness that goes with an apparently timeless 'common language' in which 'the head of the clan is confused with the latest great grandson' (Armes 145-46). For Adorno and Horkheimer, this presents a unified system with a single rhythm of monopoly, so powerful that it strips away artistic pretensions within the discourse of radio to reveal - or rather, to celebrate - the operation of business as a paradigm of legitimacy derived from demotics. The turn away from inter-subjectivity that marked out the appearance of broadcast radio as a separate entity from the telephone is read as 'control of the individual consciousness' predicated on the absence of a 'machinery of rejoinder' . A discourse of professionalism intersects with this technological lack to complete a system that masks its suppression of public spontaneity by appearing to engage that public, but always on pre-determined conditions of its own choice (349-50). C. Wright Mills summarises this position as one that laments the passing of 'the simple democratic society of primary

publics' that interacted via face-to-face communication. That society has been superseded by simultaneously enlarging and centralising institutions of government and culture. Their work is instanced by radio's gift to the political leader of access 'to a million people he [sic] never saw and will never see' (581).

Speaking from a Leavisite position, Abrams is concerned about the way in which radio has succeeded in 'defusing the moral atmosphere' because of the 'tendencies to trivialisation' endemic to the logic of broadcasting: 'the 'law of optimum inoffensiveness''. This law derives from the very fact of radio's availability, an availability that is utterly permissive because of its nature as a public good. Such permissiveness encourages methods of measurement which are ordered by what audiences tolerate, not necessarily what they endorse. When coupled to a uni-directional flow of information, it manufactures an unholy respect for the authority of the speaking subject. Only by addressing specific audiences - and sometimes by assisting in the formation of subcultures - can such systems escape this mass address (103,105,107-08,110,113). And clearly, the early days and nights of radio designated 'broadcasting' as 'entertainment' (Humphery 113). For contemporary left miserabilism, this position undergoes a (fairly minimal) translation into an account of radio as one of a series of entertainment domesticities linked to its early role - since handed on to television - as 'the organiser of domestic routines and the chief mediator of the attentions of the state and of capital at the hearth' (Lewis and Booth 187).

But is radio life so straightforward? Consider Barthes' discussion of "The Grain of the Voice". He looks to music (be it live, recorded or broadcast, classical or popular) for 'an access to jouissance, to loss'. Distinguishing, after Kristeva, between the 'pheno-song' and the 'geno-song', he abjures the first for its attention to an even-tempered structure and style, in the service of 'the tissue of cultural values', favouring instead the latter's directness, guaranteed by a material tie to language that transcends representational protocols and draws its power from a more elemental seduction and excess. This is 'the culture of the "grain" of the voice', 'the body in the voice as it sings'. It is the special gift of this voice to eroticise the listener's world and loosen the ties of subjectivity through climax (179, 182-83,188). Similarly, the skill of live radio is that '[o]nce a word is spoken, nothing can bring it back' (Miller 184). But something can: memory, as in this sequence from Don DeLillo's Libra:

> He heard an old familiar voice on the kitchen radio, some voice from the old days of radio, couldn't quite recall the man's name, but famous and familiar, with laughter in the background, and he sat very still as if to draw out the moment, struck by the complex emotion carried on a voice from another era, tender and shattering, a three-line joke that brings back everything. (DeLillo 222)

The mystic ways in which early radio critics and scientists spoke of the 'Aether' seems equally transgressive. In his Concise Radio Handbook of 1933, 'Written for the Australian Set Owner and Amateur Constructor in simple language, and fully illustrated with diagrams and specially made drawings', Humphery

defines this troublesome term as the medium through which electro-magnetic waves wander; 'aether theory' maintains that 'all space and matter is permeated by this medium which cannot be isolated or detected by any of the senses' (27). The ether was held to offer contact with the dead and cure for the cancerous (Walker 34). New forms of musical technology emerged to cope with it, to transform 'the demonic squeals and hiss of the ether' into 'a sweet-voiced child' (Biocca 65). (Of course, for the Virginian who finds herself in Los Angeles with too many powders in too many places - Alison Poole, narrator of Jay McInerney's Story of My Life - the radio is an essential companion to deciding whether or not to face the day, because of its important diurnal atmospheric advice via the 'air-quality index' (McInerney 52).)

It is clearly resistive and wild, this medium which is not one, like the women who published a protest in the Australian press in 1955 against soap operas (then sometimes known as 'womb tremblers'), arguing that 'most of the serials served up to us as we do our household chores are moronic, insulting to our intelligence, ought to be banned, ramble on too much, are not in good taste and are far too morbid' (Quoted in Walker 66).

It would be quite wrong to assume that the nineteenth-/twentieth century cusp's burst of technological innovations arrived without the accompaniment - sometimes the premonition - of debates about the shape that systems of communication should take in terms of the specified socio-cultural interests of particular categories of person. The binding and unbinding of time and space, the visibility and audibility of signs from elsewhere, both promised and delivered a sophisticated series of dialogues throughout communities, as Marvin's discussion of the electric light and the telephone points out. These included discussions of the possibility of a new world order, brought on by the spread of knowledge to the people, that might transcend the chauvinism of sovereign-states (192-93).

People around the world clearly do rely on radio for its easy permeation of barriers. The United States Government pays for two thousand hours of international radio a week, broadcast in over forty languages. Its Radio Free Europe had more than sixty per cent of Romanian adults living under Ceaucescu as regular listeners. In Nigeria, a third of the population listens to the BBC. Under tight local restrictions, audiences turn to international liberal capitalist radio for truth. When the Soviet Union stopped jamming Radio Liberty in 1988, this was an act of enormously significant symbolic politics (Elliott 113,115,121).

In the same week, five British citizens were fined for receiving radio signals not endorsed by their government; the technical offence was 'listening to stations they were not authorised to receive' (Campbell and Townson 14). This bespoke a similarly meaningful pre-occupation of governments with culture. And such a sign of resistance resonates with the satisfaction expressed by Australian Broadcasting Commission Chair Richard Boyer in 1942 at the breakdown of patriarchal authority in the home brought about by counter-factual, permissively available information springing from the set (Miller 185-

86). Chicago in the 1930s, for instance, sported basement clubs where second-generation migrant youth met in search of cultural experimentation. (Ethnic broadcasters had been at work from a decade earlier) (Cohen 17-18). By the time of the Second War, there were over a hundred non-English language stations in North America (Barlow 84). And it was radio in the Italy of the mid-1970s that was the first medium in the history of mass communication to evade the control of state and capital on a wayward path of excess (Grieco 101). Less excitingly, an advertising consultant to the nascent Australian commercial FM industry outlined a projection of the ideal audience of the 1980s, in these terms:

> the bloke who owns $3,000 worth of stereo gear and buys lots of records - a music enthusiast who appreciates quality - an 'age of me' person who expresses his good taste in life-style purchases. (L'Estrange 38)

Radio has always had, then, a dynamic of the high and the low, the politically raw and the desensitising cooked. This is in keeping with its pre-eminent position as a balcon d'essai for the domain of research into mass communication. Descartes was clearly one of the early modern theorists of radio culture. His publication of a "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Directing One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences" in 1637 contained a defiant apologia for choosing to write in French ('my native language') rather than Latin ('the language of my teachers') in search of audiences that would 'use only their natural reason in its purity' as opposed to 'those who only trust old books' (56). It is this popular appeal, the address to the many by the few, that links radio formatively to other culture industries and the remarks of consternation and celebration that circulate as their embrace. The tension expressed at these polarities, and the academic movements between them, give a contour to the essays in this volume that is reinforced in its significance by the modelling for so many of those industries by their radio ancestor. It is obviously time for radio to become as 'theoretically garrulous' as the self-invested emperor of cultural theory (also known as the cinema) (Carroll 4).

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