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# Painting with Sound: The Kaleidoscopic World of Lance Sieveking, a British Radio Modernist

## *Abstract*

In the late 1920s, British Radio became briefly and creatively entwined with a broader modernist culture. Largely through a series of spectacular programmes such as *The Kaleidoscope* (1928), made by the producer Lance Sieveking, the BBC started to develop an ‘art’ of sound. This episode has generally been passed over in histories of modernism and broadcasting: at best, it has been seen as a brief and whimsical piece of formal experimentation. But through examining Sieveking’s private papers, this article shows that this new art of sound was rich in meanings and symbolism, and had a wider influence than has hitherto been assumed. Sieveking drew heavily on his own life, which encompassed imprisonment and flying during the First World War, and a glittering array of social acquaintances, which connected him with the most advanced artistic thinking. This led him to find ways of representing in sound the subjective mental experiences and jumble of memories that so fascinated modernist artists in an age influenced by popular Freudianism. Sieveking’s life and writing also shows how he drew boldly from the visual language of experimental silent cinema at a critical moment in its own development. In creating a complex montage style for radio, Sieveking also anticipated some of the aesthetic devices that would be deployed in the coming era of sound on film. Sieveking and his programmes therefore illustrate a particular moment of British cultural history when the creative boundaries between different media were especially porous, with highly creative results.

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## Introduction

For many ordinary Britons between the wars, the first—perhaps for some, the *only*—direct experience of having a work of high modernist art in their own homes can be dated quite precisely: to Tuesday 4 September 1928. It was then that millions of them gathered around their family radio sets and caught a programme unlike any they had heard before. At 9.50 p.m. the BBC's 70-minute long radio 'experiment' began.<sup>1</sup> At its Savoy Hill headquarters in London the announcer warned that what followed would be 'fairly alarming'. Then, across the country, what the announcer called a 'tumultuous noise' was unleashed: fragments of dialogue, poetry, and music, clapping melting into the sound of the sea, the passionate avowals of a lover melting into the sweet singing of a choir, dance tunes melting into the symphonic grandeur of Beethoven. Vignette-after-vignette drifted out of the loudspeakers, interspersed seamlessly with the impressionistic sounds of cafes or countryside or battlefield.<sup>2</sup> Some of the content was comfortingly familiar: snippets of Schuman, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Strauss, Wagner, Grieg, Tchaikovsky; poetry from Swinburne, Keats, Donne. In form, however, the programme was disconcertingly new: it moved between various ingredients and episodes with no unifying narrative voice or perspective.<sup>3</sup> For some listening at home this apparently shapeless aural mosaic was like being given 'gas in the dentist's chair'.<sup>4</sup> For others it provided a 'fantastic transmigration'. Newspapers pronounced it as either 'mad' or 'one of the most extraordinary feats of broadcasting which has ever been carried out'.<sup>5</sup> Whether liked or loathed, however, few would have disagreed with one paper's judgement: that the programme amounted to 'the most ambitious venture yet made by the BBC'.<sup>6</sup> For *Vox* magazine it was not just ambitious; it was a glimpse of the future. Henceforth, *Vox* suggested, radio plays would be more like a 'succession of pictures in sound'. Meaning would lie in the sensory effect induced by a programme's overall rhythm; the 'struggle to unravel it', would fill the listener 'with a feeling of "something attempted, something done"'.<sup>7</sup> It felt as if British radio's modernist moment had truly arrived.

Despite such contemporaneous hyperbole, both the programme itself, *The Kaleidoscope*, and the man whose singular vision lay behind it,

<sup>1</sup> *Radio Times*, 4 September 1928.

<sup>2</sup> Lilly Library, Indiana University-Bloomington: Sieveking MSS (hereafter 'LLS'): Scripts: *The Kaleidoscope*, 4 September 1928.

<sup>3</sup> A. Crisell, 'Better Than Magritte: How Drama on the Radio became Radio Drama', *Journal of Radio Studies*, 7 (2000), 464–73.

<sup>4</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 5 September 1928.

<sup>5</sup> *Evening News*, 5 September 1928.

<sup>6</sup> *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, 3 September 1928;

<sup>7</sup> *Vox*, 21 December 1929.

Lance Sieveking (1896–1972), have been almost completely invisible in histories of both modernism and broadcasting ever since. Few critics have tried to decipher either the programme or the man. This article is an attempt to rectify such neglect. By drawing on Sieveking's private life, and by placing his work in the context of other cultural trends in 1920s Britain, particularly the fashion for self-analysis and the development of a thriving discourse surrounding experimental cinema, *The Kaleidoscope*, and some of the other Sieveking programmes that follow it in 1929, can, I hope, be revealed as historically significant in several respects.

First, I wish to argue that, due largely to Sieveking's efforts, British radio in the 1920s should be acknowledged as a legitimate participant in any study of native modernism. Hitherto, the modernist story has been framed, overwhelmingly, in terms of literary or cinematic experiment. If radio has had a role it has merely been as something capable of inspiring novel literary responses, or as a channel through which writers such as T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, or Ezra Pound might disseminate their own work; rarely has it been seen as a source of original ideas in itself.<sup>8</sup> If we turn to Margaret Fisher's study of Pound's early BBC programmes, we get some inkling of why broadcasting has been marginalized in this way. Unlike cinema, Fisher writes, radio was 'evanescent, practiced behind the walls of commercial or state officialdom, largely by producers and technicians who did not operate like an avant-garde and, according to film and art historians, achieved little of artistic significance'.<sup>9</sup> Almost every aspect of this statement can be questioned. True, evanescence is a problem. It is certainly difficult to analyse programmes that were never recorded and thus lost to the ether the moment they ended. In Sieveking's case, this absence has been compounded by a recurring assumption that 'no script exists' for *The Kaleidoscope* or its successors, and that, as Debra Rae Cohen suggests, the 'only traces that remain' are therefore the 'confused reaction' his work prompted.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, however, a full script *does* exist. Indeed, we have Sieveking's own working copy, alongside scripts for other broadcasts in 1928 and 1929 and a large

<sup>8</sup> See D. R. Cohen, 'Modernism on Radio', in P. Brooker et al., eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford, 2010), 586–7; D. R. Cohen et al., eds, *Broadcasting Modernism* (Florida, 2009); T. Avery, *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922–1938* (Aldershot, 2006), 38; A. Frattarola, 'The Modernist "Microphone Play": Listening in the Dark to the BBC', *Modern Drama*, 52 (2009), 449, 450.

<sup>9</sup> M. Fisher, *Ezra Pound's Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931–1933* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 45.

<sup>10</sup> See Cohen, 'Modernism', 595; D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988), 194; P. Scannell, "'The Stuff of Radio': Developments in Radio Features and Documentaries before the War', in J. Corner, ed., *Documentary and the Mass Media* (London, 1986), 6.

collection of his private letters.<sup>11</sup> Sieveking's wider oeuvre was also prolific: at least nine novels, four collections of poetry, and an array of *belles-lettres* published between 1919 and his death in 1972. This broader range of source material compensates for the absence of programme recordings. Drawing on it sheds a brighter light on Sieveking's activities for the BBC. It reveals how mistaken it would be to think of Sieveking as operating behind the 'walls' of the BBC. As Anne McCauley noted in a recent study of his written work, he actually 'reflected the most advanced thinking about the expressive potential of new media in the 1920s'.<sup>12</sup> The full meaning of Sieveking's radio programmes, as well as his written work, can indeed only be properly appreciated if we explore this personal background more insistently: his life experiences, his rich network of acquaintances, his intellectual passions. As Paddy Scannell has argued, radio programmes are 'humanly made things': they bear the traces of thinking, feeling individuals. In Sieveking's case, I wish to argue that this is especially so: he was open to modernist influences through key friendships and professional connections; he was fully aware that part of the modernist project was to examine one's state of mind and find new ways of representing its complexities in art; he was, in particular, drawn to some of the iconic technologies of modernity, such as flying and cinema. So whereas Paddy Scannell rather dismisses Sieveking for inhabiting a 'closed little enclave of art and literature', claiming his attempts to create a new aural art were 'banal or pretentious', a stream of 'baroque' whimsies,<sup>13</sup> recourse to Sieveking's private papers suggests that his dialogue with the aesthetic theories and practices of other artistic people around him fed directly into his radio work, giving it an 'artistic significance' that has so far gone unrecognized. In short, it suggests that 'radio modernism' needs to be understood as something more than just modernism *on* the radio: it needs to embrace the idea of radio being an integral part of the modernist project, with the potential of finding its own distinct language and role.

A secondary intention of this study is to challenge, by implication, the notion that Sieveking's work was an isolated and short-lived intervention with no real bearing on the wider history of British media. Sieveking clearly undermines somewhat Fisher's claim that radio producers like him operated 'behind the walls' of officialdom. We might therefore also question whether the BBC as a whole is too often misrepresented as a self-enclosed and bureaucratic institution inimical

<sup>11</sup> Held at the Lilly Library, Indiana University-Bloomington. See note 2 above.

<sup>12</sup> A. McCauley, 'Francis Bruguière and Lance Sieveking's *Beyond This Point* (1929): An Experiment in Abstract Photography, Synaesthesia, and the Cinematic Book', in J. Smith, ed., *More than One: Photographs in Sequence* (New Haven, 2008), 47, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Scannell, 'The Stuff of Radio', 4.

to creativity. Recently, for example, Todd Avery has written of the BBC's own 'unstinting efforts' to form a "'total institution'" of media imperialism' under its first Director-General John Reith.<sup>14</sup> In similar vein, both L. W. Conolly and D. L. LeMahieu have described the Corporation's staff in the same period as 'officials', as if they were mere functionaries, while Debra Rae Cohen has written of a 'trend towards coordination, consolidation and control' as characteristic of the period.<sup>15</sup> Such attitudes perhaps bear the long-term influence of Asa Briggs, who, as Raphael Samuel suggested, adopted a somewhat 'top-down' and policy-centred approach in his monumental history of British broadcasting: in doing so, Samuel argued, Briggs missed the opportunity to treat seriously the personal testimonies from those below the BBC's senior ranks, or embrace the importance of 'networking', or reflect initiatives that 'flourished on the peripheries'.<sup>16</sup> Sieveking, however, provides a means of taking us a little in the direction Samuel recommended. We know, for example, that other figures congregated around Sieveking; one producer suggested they might form a 'small, select Soviet' to nurture their creative work within the BBC.<sup>17</sup> Sieveking appears to have been personally liked by both Reith himself and one of his key deputies, Val Goldsmith.<sup>18</sup> There was certainly sufficient support from above for Sieveking to be given charge in 1928 of a new 'Programme Research Department', from where, in the space of 1 year, he produced a stream of epics inspired by the success of *The Kaleidoscope*, including *Love* (1928), *Kaleidoscope II* (1929), and *Intimate Snapshots* (1929). Although this explicitly experimental phase was to ebb away by 1930, Sieveking would by then have left his mark. For, as one of his fellow producers, Lionel Fielden, put it, he acted as 'a stimulant' from whom occasionally fell 'a shower of brilliant ideas'.<sup>19</sup> And if we take note of recent studies by James Mansell and Charles Drazin, it is even possible to argue that his most experimental work, in programmes such as *The Kaleidoscope*, presaged developments in early sound film, specifically in ways later adopted by directors such as Alberto Cavalcanti and Humphrey Jennings at the General Post Office Film Unit.<sup>20</sup> Thus, just as

<sup>14</sup> Avery, *Radio Modernism*, 38; Frattarola, 'Microphone Play', 450.

<sup>15</sup> L. W. Conolly, *Bernard Shaw and the BBC* (Toronto, 2009), xiv; LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, 182–92; Cohen, 'Modernism', 586–7.

<sup>16</sup> R. Samuel, 'The Voice of Britain', in *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain: Theatres of Memory, Volume II* (London, 1998), 188–90.

<sup>17</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 11 May 1928.

<sup>18</sup> V. Gielgud, *British Radio Drama 1922–1956* (London, 1957), 27.

<sup>19</sup> L. Fielden, *The Natural Bent* (London, 1960), 106.

<sup>20</sup> J. Mansell, 'Rhythm, Modernity, and the Politics of Sound', 161–7, and C. Drazin, 'Alberto Cavalcanti: Lessons in Fusion at the GPO Film Unit', 45–51, both in S. Anthony and J. Mansell, eds, *The Projection of Britain: a History of the GPO Film Unit* (London, 2011). Sieveking's career at the BBC stretched from 1926 to 1957. Although most of his work falls outside this study, it is worth mentioning in outline. His formal involvement began in

a group of film directors found a way of using avant-garde techniques in the institutionally sponsored framework of the GPO, Sieveking was able to first assimilate, and then help *consolidate* a set of modernist influences within an equally important institutional setting, namely the BBC. In doing so, he ensured not just that British radio had a richer texture than it might otherwise have had; he also helped to define the emerging profession of the radio producer—as someone working in an intrinsically synthetic art.

### A 'Psychologizing Age'

It is important to our understanding of Sieveking's personal contribution to his 1928 programme that we see its creation, first, in the context of what Mathew Thomson has called a 'psychologizing process' in early twentieth-century Britain.<sup>21</sup> In part, this was a matter of perceived public mood. Richard Overy, for instance, has written of how in the 1920s and 1930s 'a language of anxiety and sentiments of uncertainty' took hold among intellectual circles and frequently percolated more widely through society.<sup>22</sup> In his analysis, a strong sense of decline drew strength from a number of concerns: the risk of biological degeneration, the unmanageable destructive power of the machine age, the chilling notion of entropy, with its suggestion of inevitable decay, the possibility that modern urban existence was shredding our nerves and creating new forms of alienation.<sup>23</sup> The common thread was that science seemed to be revealing all sorts of hitherto invisible forces and showing just how strong their influence on human life and behaviour might be. In this respect, the most pervasive idea of all was Sigmund Freud's notion

April 1926, with his appointment as Assistant Director of the Education Department. Over the next 4 years he produced talks and short readings, compiled news bulletins during the General Strike, and pioneered outside broadcast sports commentaries. In July 1930, he produced the first ever television drama: a version of Pirandello's *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth* transmitted from the Baird studio in Covent Garden, London. He later worked in the Variety Department. From 1932 till 1942 he produced about 200 radio plays, and between 1945 and 1956 he acted as script-editor on many more, becoming a favoured adaptor for authors such as H. G. Wells, E. M. Forster, A. Huxley, C. S. Lewis, and E. Waugh. During the Second World War he ran the BBC's West Region in Bristol. In 1951, he had 2 hours of prime-time television to direct a version of his own novel, *A Tomb with a View*—a programme which stretched the skills of BBC studio technicians to the limits and divided the critics, although the *News of the World* decided that he was 'trying to do for television what Orson Welles did for the cinema in *Citizen Kane*' (quoted in 'Autobiographical Sketches of Lance Sieveking', an unpublished typescript with unnumbered pages in the private collection of Paul Sieveking (hereafter 'Sieveking: Sketches').

<sup>21</sup> M. Thomson, 'Psychology and the "Consciousness of Modernity" in Early Twentieth-century Britain', in M. Daunton and B. Rieger, eds, *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (London, 2001), 104.

<sup>22</sup> R. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2009), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Overy, *Morbid Age*, 2–4, 47.

of the 'hidden' dimensions of human consciousness, and specifically the notion that 'base' thoughts, rather than more conscious, rational ones, might be driving our behaviour. Freud's ideas were frequently misunderstood and very often bastardized. But they attracted huge interest, drawing strength as they did from a pre-existing fascination with Theosophy, Spiritualism, and self-help.<sup>24</sup> The result by the end of the 1920s, according to Thomson, was an important reconceptualization of human psychology. Confidence in the notion of a unitary and rational self was evaporating and being replaced by a 'multidimensional and potentially irrational' mental world that was not just highly malleable, but also, by implication, dangerously *suggestible*. This was a subliminal world that also bore the traces of an individual's past. Early experiences, so Freudians argued, always left their mark. As Thomson puts it, 'The human mind was recognized as having a mind of its own.'<sup>25</sup>

This perceptual shift had wider cultural resonance because it became entangled with what Thomson calls the 'consciousness of modernity' itself. In other words, when Virginia Woolf famously pronounced, after the first London exhibition of Manet and the Post-Impressionist painters, that 'On or about December 1910 human character changed', she was suggesting, like many other intellectuals and artists of her generation, that, as Thomson puts it, 'understanding human consciousness was often an essential part of a sense of being modern'.<sup>26</sup> By implication, greater self-reflexivity became something of an artistic duty, and Thomson points to the opening up of what he calls 'a more extensive internal topography of the self' in British inter-war cultural life. This encouraged 'the individualism, and in turn potentially the atomization and narcissism, that have been associated with the experience of modernity'.<sup>27</sup> In particular, intellectuals were fascinated by the unease, dissatisfaction, and mental conflict inherent in modern life: the apparent need for individuals to resolve a tension between a 'civilizing, repressing process and the innate desire to satisfy instinctive impulses'.<sup>28</sup>

In this psychologized culture, Lance Sieveking was an early adopter. As a teenager before the War he had had an intense friendship with another boy his own age, Vivian Burbury. It was Burbury who later went on to translate into English Krafft-Ebing's 1886 classic work on human sexual behaviour, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. And it is clear from their letters to each other as teenagers that Burbury introduced Sieveking to a

<sup>24</sup> Thomson, 'Psychology', 97–100.

<sup>25</sup> Thomson, 'Psychology', 100–2.

<sup>26</sup> Thomson, 'Psychology', 101–2.

<sup>27</sup> Thomson, 'Psychology', 104.

<sup>28</sup> Thomson, 'Psychology', 105.



fertile, if somewhat garbled mix of ideas about telepathy, spiritualism, the occult, Freudianism, science fiction—what Burbury called the whole ‘mind culture’ business.<sup>29</sup> At the age of just sixteen, Sieveking had also attempted his first novel, ‘The Thought Machine’ (later published in 1924 as *Stampede!*), a sub-H. G. Wells fantasy that played with the idea of telepathy and mind control.<sup>30</sup> The clearest expression of his fascination with that ‘internal topography of the self’, though, came many years later, when he published his novel *The Woman She Was* (1934). In this, Sieveking tells the story of his heroine backwards, starting in old age and ending in birth, so that, as he told his readers, ‘you gradually see how and why she became what she was’. Sieveking also wrote privately to his mother about the book’s underlying conception. ‘All of us are made or marred by early experience’, he said, ‘And it is this lack of understanding and clearing up that makes all the trouble and misery and injustice in this bad world.’<sup>31</sup> He went on to stress that his own childhood had, of course, been fine. But we also know from his private letters and memoirs that his experiences as a young adult also happened to have been extraordinarily rich and varied. It is therefore difficult to avoid interpreting his work, both in print and on air, as at least partly autobiographical in nature. Furthermore, it often focuses exactly on the kind of mental struggles which Mathew Thomson associated with the period. Indeed, there are two aspects of Sieveking’s personal life before he joined the BBC that demand particular scrutiny in this respect. First, his wartime experiences, and especially the network of acquaintances he built up during the course of the conflict and in the years immediately afterwards. These exposed Sieveking to some of the most stimulating artistic currents of the age, and, simultaneously, fostered a long-term unease with his own sense of purpose. Secondly, there was his very specific experience of flying as a wartime pilot. This encouraged him to explore the nature of the mind in distinctive ways and, I want to argue, also helped shape his attitude to the new medium of radio.

When discussing Sieveking’s experience of war, perhaps the most revealing expression of his own attitude came in a poem, ‘Post-Scriptum’, which he published in 1922:

War is abominable. But it is also Tremendous!  
Prodigious! Exciting! Disgusting! and whimsically Great!<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 29 October 1913.

<sup>30</sup> L. de Giberne Sieveking, *Stampede!* (London, 1924). Note: Sieveking often switched between ‘Lancelot de Giberne’ and ‘Lance’.

<sup>31</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 2 February 1933.

<sup>32</sup> L. de Giberne Sieveking, *The Cud* (London, 1922), 47–8.

Sieveking's lines articulate neatly the complex, even contradictory set of interpretations that historians have also provided when it comes to exploring the psychological and cultural impact of the First World War. One approach, which quickly took root, has been to see the War as both cause and symptom of a deeper malaise, namely the decline of civilization and the sudden destruction of a long-held belief in relentless human progress.<sup>33</sup> A rather different interpretation, advanced most fully by Jay Winter, is to stress people's desire to heal the fractures of war by asserting historical continuities, often through memorials and acts of remembrance. One dimension to this, as Stefan Goebel has shown, was the tendency to envelop recollections of war in imagery derived from the Middle Ages and portray fighting in chivalric or mystical terms.<sup>34</sup> A particularly influential view, articulated most famously by Paul Fussell and Eric Leed in separate studies first published in the 1970s, and later reiterated by Samuel Hynes and others, was that the War's effect was less one of brutalization than of *alienation*; as such, it became a kind of incubator of modernism.<sup>35</sup> In making this claim, Fussell himself had drawn largely upon the literary outpourings of Britain's officer class. What he discovered in their writing was irony, black humour, and disillusionment generated by the 'dynamics of hope abridged': this was a generation of bright young men at war with their elders, infused after trench life with a binary mentality of 'them' and 'us'. Leed's contribution was to show that because men in the battlefield had often idealized home as a point of continuity amidst the turmoil, they frequently broke down after they had returned: the reality of civilian life released 'funds of repressed anger and bitterness' as well as lingering nostalgia for military life.<sup>36</sup> These interpretations have since been considerably revised, not least through a steady widening of scope, moving us beyond the sole testimony of literate officers in the muddy, shell-shocked trenches of the Western Front. We now appreciate not just the sense of futility or despair that clearly existed for some, but also the thrill of combat, the

<sup>33</sup> This was, for example, the subject of a talk by Albert Schweitzer in Oxford in 1922 (see Overy, *Morbid Age*, 10). Jon Lawrence describes vividly how Britain after the War 'was a nation haunted by the fear that violence had slipped its chains... irrevocably "brutalized" by the mass carnage'. He also shows convincingly how these fears were exaggerated: J. Lawrence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), 557–89. See also M. Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester, 2009), 7.

<sup>34</sup> See J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995), and S. Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940* (Cambridge, 2007), 1.

<sup>35</sup> P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 2000); E. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979); S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Leed, *No Man's Land*, 188–9.

pleasure of comradeship, even the sheer boredom experienced by many others.<sup>37</sup> Adrian Gregory also points to wide sectional differences determined by class, denomination, gender, and region.<sup>38</sup> The First World War and its psychological and cultural consequences, then, remain open to several interpretations. And, as Hew Strachan suggests, 'until at least the late 1920s those different meanings co-existed with each other': everyone emerging from the conflict 'had his or her own sense of the war's significance'.<sup>39</sup> Often, though, as Alan Kramer argues, such was the extraordinary nature of people's experiences that many were also 'unable to express in words' what they had gone through.<sup>40</sup> In this respect, the part of Fussell's thesis that still has real purchase is his notion that 'Data entering the consciousness during the war emerge long afterwards as metaphor.'<sup>41</sup> More recently Michael Roper has provided a psychoanalytic interpretation that also suggests many veterans could only work-through their experiences in the longer term, since they had to make sense of a thoroughly contradictory set of emotional responses: the fear of death, but also the shame of cowardice; the desire for maternal comfort, but also the need to be good soldiers and grown men. There were, as a result, an awful lot of unprocessed feelings around, even among those who had been most resilient.<sup>42</sup>

Sieveking's poetic response to war in 1922, then, not only reflects some of the contradictory interpretations by historians; it also most likely suggests real self-awareness of his own contradictory emotions at the time. Thus, for instance, when Sieveking joined the Artists' Rifles at the age of eighteen soon after the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, his first response was the sheer pleasure of his escape from the tedium and ennui of home life in Hastings. This was quickly replaced by recognition of boredom as the routines of training and waiting became apparent. Within a few months he was writing home saying that he wanted to be back with his mother 'and the little white house with the green shutters, way up on the cliffs of time, somehow left

<sup>37</sup> See B. Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002); D. Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2005); N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London, 1998), 363; J. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London, 1999), 1, 6. On the thrill of killing see, for example, the quotations from Julian Grenfell, a young cavalry officer and amateur poet, in A. Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford, 2007), 230–3.

<sup>38</sup> A. Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1994), 6. See also J. S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War* (London, 2006), xvii.

<sup>40</sup> Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, 254.

<sup>41</sup> Fussell, *Great War*, 188.

<sup>42</sup> Roper, *Secret Battle*, 20.

stranded by the sea high and dry – in some forgotten ledge from which the surging waves of the twentieth [sic] century sound dim and far off'.<sup>43</sup> Such feelings of nostalgia and restlessness were intensified when he spent 13 months as a prisoner of war in Germany. There was no sense of brutalization here. We know that when it came to their treatment as Prisoners of War, officers such as Sieveking led what Michael Moynihan has labelled 'a life of almost pampered ease'.<sup>44</sup> Moynihan himself drew on the diary of Captain Douglas Lyall Grant, who, at one point, described captivity as 'very like being at school again'.<sup>45</sup> Sieveking, too, described camp life as 'rather like one imagines Paradise'.<sup>46</sup> In one camp, for instance, he enjoyed the close company of Alec Macdonald, Hugh Kingsmill Lunn, and John Ferrar Holms: three well-read and formidably articulate men, all later to be published authors, who together allowed Sieveking to wallow in endless reading and conversation. 'The names of Cellini, Milton, Wells, George Moore, Don Quixote, and Dunne would be invoked' in nightly debate, Sieveking recalled.<sup>47</sup> Books and conversations, he told his family back home, 'have taken me out of my sordid, degraded position and whirled me off to the subconscious world'.<sup>48</sup> If this was not enough, Sieveking practised playing the piano and the cello, studied French and German, and even created a prisoner's Christmas play to be performed before an array of British, Canadian, American, French, Austrian, Serbian, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, Indian, Russian, and Belgian inmates. This was a cosmopolitan crowd in which Sieveking found that 'kindred spirits are close at hand day after day and month after month, available for companionship and talk any time... in a way that can never happen in ordinary life'.<sup>49</sup>

Rather perversely, then, prison life provided the young Sieveking with a chance, not just to forge friendships, but widen cultural horizons. He would, though, be gripped periodically by 'utter and complete ennui'.<sup>50</sup> As distraction, he would sometimes write; by August 1918 he reckoned to have a novel, some verse, nonsense rhymes, and a collection of short stories all ready to print on his return

<sup>43</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 24 August 1915.

<sup>44</sup> M. Moynihan, ed., *Black Bread and Barbed Wire: Prisoners in the First World War* (London, 1978), 79. See also R. Garrett, *P.O.W.* (Newton Abbot & London, 1981), 117: 'Conditions at the average officers' camp in Germany were by no means intolerable'. In A. R. Kramer, 'Prisoners in the First World War', in S. Scheipers, ed., *Prisoners in War* (Oxford, 2010), 75–90: in contrast to ordinary soldiers, officers 'were generally, if not always, treated with dignity' (78).

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Moynihan, *Black Bread*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> L. Sieveking, *The Eye of the Beholder* (London, 1957), 102.

<sup>47</sup> Sieveking: Sketches.

<sup>48</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 22 April 1918.

<sup>49</sup> Sieveking: Sketches.

<sup>50</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 21 November 1917.

to England.<sup>51</sup> Yet such productivity only drew attention to all that was denied him by the reality of incarceration: it was, he wrote home, as though he had 'been wrapped up and put in a sepulchre underneath a pyramid thousands of years ago'.<sup>52</sup> Sieveking was still just 22 years old in 1918 and as time dragged on he was filled above all with a sense of lost opportunity, of ground to be made-up when the war ended. 'Dame Fortune will have to arrange a smiling future for me', he wrote to his family, 'if she is to compensate for the wilderness of barren and sapless waste in which she has compelled me to spend one of the best years of my life – or what should have been!'<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, much of Sieveking's account of POW life fits a familiar pattern. Historians have drawn attention to both the strong and enduring bonds of male friendship that were forged in conditions of captivity and the obvious frustrations of confinement.<sup>54</sup> But, Sieveking is especially interesting for what he tells us about the full range of emotional pressures that had built up among former POWs, as well as combatants, by 1918. Adam Siepp argues that when it came to demobilization all could 'claim they had willingly paid the costs of the war and deserved to be compensated', yet because this was not always forthcoming individuals sometimes struggled to discover their proper place in society.<sup>55</sup> One reason, Michael Roper suggests, was simply that because many a demobbed serviceman had only grown to manhood during the conflict 'the only civilian identity he knew was that of a child'.<sup>56</sup> In this respect, Sieveking was wonderfully emblematic, exhibiting as he did both pent-up youthful energy and a complete lack of clarity over his future career. Between 1918 and 1926, he spent time engaged, among other things, in flying delegates into and out of Paris for the Versailles peace conference (exciting, but all-too-brief), studying English at Cambridge and running the *New Cambridge Magazine* before dropping out (lack of funds), failing to join the Foreign Office as a diplomat, working briefly in a tax office (where he threatened to commit suicide through sheer boredom), returning to flying by joining what was now called the Royal Air Force and being posted to India, living on a houseboat in Kashmir in order to write, joining a theatre company in order to break into acting (a 'dusty, musty affair'), and

<sup>51</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 1 August 1918.

<sup>52</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 18 December 1917; 28 September 1918.

<sup>53</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 1 August 1918; 22 April 1918.

<sup>54</sup> The War as a whole was 'above all, a contest of endurance': A. Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2008), 1. See also S. Cole, *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> A. R. Siepp, *The Ordeal of Peace: Demobilization and the Urban Experience in Britain and Germany, 1917–1921* (Farnham, 2009), 3, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Roper, *Secret Battle*, 12.

even working briefly for the *Daily Express* as a journalist (which he abandoned because 'the Intelligentsia' did not read the paper). 'I hardly know what to do with myself', he admitted in 1919.<sup>57</sup> Seven years later, and still with no regular job, he wrote of 'beginning to feel how frightfully short time is' and wondering if he would 'ever get anything done'. Life, he lamented, remained all 'rather vague and stupid'.<sup>58</sup>

One obvious cause of Sieveking's frantic yet directionless post-war existence was that so many different opportunities had presented themselves as a result of the rich network of influential acquaintances he had built up by then. A close friendship with the painter Paul Nash (who had also joined the Artists' Rifles in 1914), and, through him, an introduction to Winston Churchill's private secretary, Eddie Marsh, had brought Sieveking into direct contact with an extraordinary and dynamic collection of 'Georgian' poets, painters, and actors. Wartime leave and post-war life was therefore characterized by regular trips to the theatre, dining at fashionable dinner parties, and becoming a regular at gallery openings. Sieveking was by now keenly interested in the work, not just of Paul Nash and his brother John, but of Vorticists such as Edward Wadsworth and members of the tight-knit Slade circle of Mark Gertler, C. R. W. Nevinson and Dora Carrington. A Cambridge connection to Geoffrey Fry, the secretary to Stanley Baldwin and Bonar Law, had also brought him into contact with, among others, the eccentric polymath C. K. Ogden, John Maynard Keynes, the architect Clough Williams-Ellis, and a host of leading figures in Whitehall, Bloomsbury, and Fleet Street. Despite the fact that, like many demobilized servicemen, he felt more at ease in the company of men, Sieveking also found himself marrying twice in quick succession—first to the wealthy April Quilter, and then to Gertler's striking young muse, Natalie Denny, whom he met at a 'Bright Young Things' bathing party in 1928.<sup>59</sup>

This rich web of social contacts would eventually serve Sieveking well. First, when it came to working for the BBC after 1926, such connections really counted. The Corporation's director of publicity, Gladstone Murray, told John Reith privately that a large part of Sieveking's value to the BBC was 'his stand in' with influential people such as the Harmsworths. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, such connections gave what Sieveking described as 'a certain shape' to his own artistic outlook, and, indirectly, to the radio programmes he made for the BBC in the late 1920s.<sup>60</sup> Encounters with some of the most inventive artistic figures of the age advanced his tastes and ideas

<sup>57</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 1 June 1919.

<sup>58</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 6 January 1926; 4 March 1926.

<sup>59</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 1 June 1924; Sieveking: Sketches.

<sup>60</sup> The quotation comes from the inside cover of Sieveking, *Beholder*.

through mutual encouragement—and sometimes rivalry. His lifelong friendship with Paul Nash, for example, clearly provided Sieveking with an ongoing education in modern art. He had himself been brought up on what he called ‘pictures of a pronounced academic sort mostly by various Victorian great-uncles’. But with Nash by his side, he recalled, ‘I found myself seeing the whole of nature through his eyes... as though I had been blind before.’<sup>61</sup> By the 1920s and 1930s he had become not just a regular visitor to the artist’s country home, but also an avid collector of his canvases. The paintings were really beyond his pocket, but as he told Nash in April 1929, ‘I love pictures, especially yours, so much that I get quite wild and madly extravagant.’<sup>62</sup> Influence flowed both ways. It was Sieveking who supplied the asthmatic Nash with vivid accounts of what it was like to fly, and helped him to realize his aerial visions. It was also Sieveking who arranged for him a place in the South of France in 1926, where, finding what Nash’s wife Bunty called his ‘best-loved grey blues, beige, yellows, grey greens and different shades and degrees of white’, the painter launched upon a new set of canvases.<sup>63</sup> In return, it was Nash who pushed Sieveking into publishing his first collections of nonsense poetry, and who arranged for his own brother John to provide the illustrations.<sup>64</sup> More than that, however, Sieveking came to regard Nash as someone who ‘enhanced and enlarged and interpreted’ the whole of his life. The painter, he claimed, ‘influenced me more deeply and lastingly than anyone I have ever known’.<sup>65</sup> It was Nash’s lack of didacticism, Sieveking believed, which led him to understand for himself what modern art ‘was all about’.<sup>66</sup> Soon he could see in every landscape not just the slopes and curves but also the ‘previously unnoticed sharply opposing angles’; he could reject literal or ‘naturalistic’ representations on the grounds that they turned out, after all, to ‘interpret nothing’.<sup>67</sup> Feasibly, we can see here the germ of Sieveking’s creative stance with *The Kaleidoscope*: his rejection of literalism; his refusal to spell out a single ‘true’ meaning for listeners; his delight in creating a sonic equivalent of ‘sharply opposing angles’. What the two men certainly shared was a more general desire to meld modernity and tradition. Thus, while Nash struggled through the 1920s and 1930s to

<sup>61</sup> Sieveking, *Beholder*, 51–2.

<sup>62</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 6 April 1929.

<sup>63</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 1 February 1926. See also A. Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London, 2010), 26; D. B. Haycock, *A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War* (London, 2009), 325–8.

<sup>64</sup> L. de Giberne Sieveking, *Dressing Gowns and Glue* (London, 1919) and L. de Giberne Sieveking, *Gladstone Bags and Marmalade* (London, 1920).

<sup>65</sup> Sieveking, *Beholder*, 53.

<sup>66</sup> Sieveking, *Beholder*, 53.

<sup>67</sup> Sieveking, *Beholder*, 51–2.

fuse elements of abstraction with recognizable landscapes, and declared famously in the modern art journal *Axis* that he was 'For, but Not With' the abstract painters, Sieveking used his 1934 manifesto, *The Stuff of Radio*, to quote approvingly from the *Architectural Review* and summarize his own position with regards to radio: 'The Old School is not always wrong, nor are the new tactics invariably right.' The aim, he continued, must be 'to support reasonable experimental work, to mould the Future, while tactfully reminding the Present of the Past'.<sup>68</sup>

Such glittering friendships, though aesthetically stimulating, clearly brought other, less desirable pressures. Privately, Sieveking, pulled in so many directions yet never quite convinced he was fulfilling his potential, was often overwhelmed by what seemed to be his own lack of progress. In March 1926, for instance, he wrote about his friend Alan Herbert's play being in the West End: 'Lord grant that it may be my lot before long', he wailed.<sup>69</sup> A month later, he was at least working for the BBC. But the long hours of his day job, combined with late nights on the town, were evidently taking their toll. 'I am so tired at the end of the day nowadays that I hardly have the energy to write', he confessed.<sup>70</sup> He was also suffering from liver and stomach complaints, and admitting privately to 'the creeping paralysis of depression that is oozing into my veins'—something he put down to the 'moves, excursions, muddles, and alarums hanging over me'.<sup>71</sup> This almost certainly alluded to a combination of acute financial difficulty, exacerbated by his father's business collapsing and his mother needing constant care, and the disintegration of his first marriage to April. He had once told his wife that he saw their marriage as providing 'my own anchorage and place and identity and location and corner *at last*'.<sup>72</sup> In 1928, with the relationship failing, he was 'feeble in spirit'.<sup>73</sup> Just as he was about to start work on *The Kaleidoscope*, he suffered a major nervous collapse.

In this rich palimpsest of experiences, good and bad, one consistent source of pleasure for Sieveking is worth special attention: his participation in the new world of aviation. He had made the first of many visits to the London Aerodrome at Hendon in 1912, when, aged sixteen, he had got a ride, crammed into the tiniest of seats, holding onto two flimsy struts for dear life. This, he decided, was indescribably 'wonderful'.<sup>74</sup> In 1915, he had therefore seized the chance to lobby his well-placed friend Eddie Marsh to get a transfer out of the Artists'

<sup>68</sup> L. Sieveking, *The Stuff of Radio* (London, 1934), 82.

<sup>69</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 4 March 1926.

<sup>70</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 29 April 1926.

<sup>71</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 18 August 1924; 25 January 1927; 27 May 1928.

<sup>72</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 17 August 1924.

<sup>73</sup> LSS: Correspondence: 27 & 28 May 1928.

<sup>74</sup> Sieveking: Sketches.



Rifles and into the Royal Naval Air Service. This was the start of a distinguished wartime career as a pilot. Before being shot down and imprisoned in 1917, he was, for instance, decorated for his part in a successful bombing raid over Belgium. He once wrote of his aerial skirmishes that engaging in mortal combat at close quarters was much like 'a duel in a wood in early morning'. He wrote, too, of how he could drop bombs and destroy a street or two in the inky blackness of night and soon be 'smoking a quiet after-lunch cigarette...with brushed hair and clean finger-nails': a striking contrast to the mud, squalor, and industrialized killing of trench warfare below.<sup>75</sup> In this respect Sieveking's description accords neatly with others described by Linda Robertson. She categorizes such notions of 'civilized' conflict in the air as being 'war-as-imagined' rather than war-as-reality.<sup>76</sup> The more dismal the circumstances of the ground war, she argues, the more appealing became the mythical image of the 'knights of the sky', eliminating the enemy cleanly, skilfully, in sporting fashion, and for a just cause.<sup>77</sup> Sieveking's writings also echo Robert Wohl's account of flight becoming 'an aesthetic event'.<sup>78</sup> Flying above the River Thames for the first time, for instance, Sieveking described seeing the water below 'grey like polished steel', and, on the horizon, the gleaming sea. 'One day', he predicted, he would 'fly to the sea and across the world—maybe I shall not return'.<sup>79</sup> Later, he would describe the extraordinary purple-pink and pale-green sunrises as he flew over East Africa. This sort of intensely visceral response was clearly not unique. Peter Englund, for instance, gives us an account of the Belgian pilot Willy Coppens, who, flying over occupied enemy lines, trembled with excitement, mesmerized by the sights below of the North Sea glistening and Brussels' familiar streets.<sup>80</sup>

Yet neither Coppens nor Sieveking fully fitted the 'glorious' role models of Robertson's analysis. When Coppens was shot at, he confessed that it was 'bad for the nervous system'; when shot down completely his depression was 'too terrifying to put into words'.<sup>81</sup> When Sieveking described his bombing 'a street or two' far below, it

<sup>75</sup> L. de Giberne Sieveking, 'The Psychology of Flying', *The English Review*, 34 (1922), 538–47.

<sup>76</sup> L. R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare: World War I Flying Aces and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis & London, 2003), ix.

<sup>77</sup> Robertson, *Civilized Warfare*, x–xviii; 158–92. The duel, she argues, was often the 'informing trope': it 'epitomized the fascination with the air war conceived as individual encounter' (235).

<sup>78</sup> R. Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908–1918* (New Haven & London, 1994), 1.

<sup>79</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 6 October 1915.

<sup>80</sup> P. Englund, *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of The First World War* (London, 2011), 435–8.

<sup>81</sup> Englund, *The Beauty and the Sorrow*, 355, 415, 436, 482.

was in the full knowledge of what his actions meant: 'So many people killed. So many injured. So many disappeared altogether.'<sup>82</sup> The image of himself as untouched by squalid realities on the ground was therefore offered in a spirit not of exultation but of deadly irony. Sieveking extends our understanding in other ways too, since Whol's focus on the aestheticization of aviation ends in 1918 while Sieveking points us towards its lingering influence, and its subtle re-emergence, more than a decade later. His overriding response to flying had always been shaped not so much by the short-lived moments of battle as by the sheer sensual contrast between his time aloft and his time on the ground. Below, he had always felt 'manacled by the very grass-blades', the 'engine' of his mind 'stuck fast'.<sup>83</sup> Whenever airborne, he had felt 'completely unrestricted', absorbed in the 'sweet air' rushing across his face, the aerial perspective, the smell and touch of the cockpit. 'The sensation of flying', he concluded then, was 'the best cure for depression – one wants to laugh and shout and sing – it's marvellous'.<sup>84</sup> In 1922, he wrote an essay for *The English Review* entitled 'The Psychology of Flying'. Here he argued that this 'startling experience' was even capable of super-charging one's mental faculties. The flyer's mind, he said, revolving as it did 'with an altogether unprecedented velocity and perfect precision', gained new powers of 'illumination'.<sup>85</sup> Wohl has shown how this intoxicated, almost Nietzschean view of the aviator was quite pervasive by 1918, particularly among artists and writers who apparently 'longed for higher forms of being'.<sup>86</sup> But what is striking about Sieveking is just how long after the war he remained under its spell, and how deeply he continued to draw on early flying experience in much of his later creative work. His 1924 novel, *The Ultimate Island*, for example, made extensive use of his private impressions of flight. Similarly, a number of his radio 'portraits' of countries such as Sweden and Finland, made in the early 1930s, deployed the 'effect' of a narrator observing the country in question from the perspective of a balloon floating miles above. It is highly significant, too, that when Sieveking described joining the BBC in 1926, he wrote of it as being 'mobilised into another "Air Force"'.<sup>87</sup>

The most vivid connection that Sieveking makes between radio and flying comes, however, with the broadcast of *The Kaleidoscope* itself in 1928. On the night of its transmission he controlled all the elements of the programme—an orchestra, a dance band, a choir, actors, sound

<sup>82</sup> Sieveking, 'Flying', 546.

<sup>83</sup> Sieveking, 'Flying'; LLS: Correspondence: 21 November 1915.

<sup>84</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 11 April 1916; 15 June 1915; 16 May 1916.

<sup>85</sup> Sieveking, 'Flying', 539–41.

<sup>86</sup> Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*, 255.

<sup>87</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 18.

effects technicians, and so on—by sitting at a studio desk called the ‘Dramatic Control Panel’. This, designed by a BBC engineer who, like Sieveking, had been a pilot, looked uncannily like a cockpit.<sup>88</sup> And Sieveking felt that here again, as with the best aeroplanes, was a machine that was ‘nimble, spry, quick to answer’ his touch: ‘I felt exactly as I felt on that cold bright morning when I had been told to take the aeroplane into the air alone for the first time’, he recalled. There, in front of the control panel, he experienced an old sense of freedom and excitement return: ‘The world was listening. No turning back now! We were off. The rotary engine roared just behind my back . . . Back with the joystick and up we go.’<sup>89</sup> Radio and flying; both used the air as their medium, cutting through it with speed and accuracy by means of instinct and sharp reflexes. For Sieveking this new craft of broadcasting clearly represented a chance to be un-manacled from the grass blades again: it was exhilarating, a kind of homecoming.

Here, too, was an opportunity for Sieveking to make some sense of all that he had gone through since childhood. Playing the Control Panel that night, a flood of memories was unleashed, and he felt as if, in his private flight of fancy, he were creating new aerial patterns out of old impressions:

Here is your iridescent vapour, and you may paint with it on the underside of the clouds. Now here is poem, bee-hum, geese-cackle, woman-cry, and dynamite. Gather them together, feeling as you weave, the rhythm and the tempo.<sup>90</sup>

The aural tapestry that Sieveking wove that night was in a very real sense the story of his own life—and, more specifically, the dramatization of his own mental turmoil. Reading *The Kaleidoscope’s* script, we discover that his on-air introduction tells listeners that ‘the influences which come into a man’s life very largely determine his character’.<sup>91</sup> Afterwards, he referred to it as an extraordinarily ‘personal and private’ affair.<sup>92</sup> The programme’s multitude of fragments threw up a succession of scenes that, in the light of Sieveking’s background, start to make sense. We hear of childhood days messing about with boats at the

<sup>88</sup> There is a more detailed description of the ‘Dramatic Control Panel’ in Fisher, *Radio Operas*, 75–8.

<sup>89</sup> Sieveking; Sketches. See also D. Hendy, ‘Danger in the Air: The Covert Cultures of Early Radio’, *Cambridge Literary Review*, 5 (2011), 115–27.

<sup>90</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 103.

<sup>91</sup> LSS: Scripts: ‘“The Kaleidoscope”’: A Rhythm Constructed and Produced by Lance Sieveking’ (4 September 1928). Note: the subtitle used in Sieveking’s working script, though it bears the correct transmission date, is slightly different to that published in *Radio Times*, which is ‘A Rhythm, representing the Life of a Man from Cradle to Grave’.

<sup>92</sup> Sieveking; Sketches.

seaside, idyllic holidays in France, student days at Cambridge, seduction, courtship, laughing and dancing in cafes, and dinner parties. We are also exposed to war, financial worries, domestic arguments, and, ultimately, the betrayal of a loved one. At each stage our hero is haunted by a 'Bad' voice wheedling away inside his head: '...remember only one thing matters: do what you jolly well like...'. In counterpoint, the voice of 'Good' offers moralizing tales such as a stirring account of the 'dignified' end of General Gordon, hacked to death by Arab assailants. At one point, we are taken to Dunsinane; at another, we join Dorian Gray and a discourse upon ageing—'Be always searching for new sensations...'. Throughout, our hero struggles with his conscience. Should he fight in the war? Should he leave his wife? Should he dive into the water and risk death? 'It's hard', he confesses, 'to be a decent chap and remember that it matters about what sort of life one leads'. In the closing sequence, to the competing strains of Handel's *Largo*, a popular dance tune, and a final ripple of angelic applause from the other side, we witness our hero trying to save his drowning wife. He dies—but as a hero.

Of course, the alignment between Sieveking's life and that of his protagonist in *The Kaleidoscope* is never perfect. But other evidence shows how Sieveking habitually leant on his past and filtered his artistic visions through the prism of personal difficulties. His later novel *Smite and Spare Not* (1933), for instance, includes chapters with titles proceeding in an obvious simulacrum of his own trajectory: 'Hendon', 'Flying machine', '4<sup>th</sup> August 1914', 'Whitehall', 'Crashed', and 'Cambridge'. There is a distinct whiff of autobiography, too, in an unusual book Sieveking wrote in 1928 in collaboration with the American abstract photographer Francis Bruguière. In *Beyond this Point* (1929), Sieveking offers the story of a man of unstable identity facing several possible courses of action, from the murderously vengeful to the sweetly reasonable, at three key moments of crisis in his life: a health scare, a marital infidelity, and financial ruin. We are presented with what the book calls a 'kaleidoscope eventfulness of days and weeks' in which the narrator tries to rally all the forces of the past that are, as he puts it, 'me at this moment'.<sup>93</sup> As Anne McCauley suggests, this was a moralizing tale in which 'snippets of dialogue, imagistic evocations of observed reality, and mental speculations combine to suggest the modern, distracted mind'.<sup>94</sup> If so, we might regard it as a close analogue of *The Kaleidoscope* in book form. Produced at much the same time, the two works clearly embodied, in both content and form, a determination not just to condense a life but, in true Freudian style, to

<sup>93</sup> L. Sieveking and F. Bruguière, *Beyond This Point* (London, 1929), 19, 42, 59, 63–6.

<sup>94</sup> McCauley, 'An Experiment', 47.

evoke the play of thoughts a person's mind might experience as it grapples with a welter of external stimuli.

### Cinema, Radio and Sound

Aside from influencing the subject matter, Sieveking's collaboration with Francis Bruguière in 1927 and 1928 was also important in shaping both *Beyond this Point* and *The Kaleidoscope* in ways that were clearly inspired by recent developments in experimental cinema.<sup>95</sup> The two men had first met through Bruguière's girlfriend, the folksinger-turned-actress Rosalinde Ivy Fuller, whose brother Walter was editor of the *Radio Times*. Bruguière had been a lighting director on the ballet film *Danse Macabre* (1922) and had recently been drawn into work on an experimental film, *The Way*, starring the Berlin cabaret performer Sebastian Droste. This aborted project tried to tell the story of a man living in a world of dreams; still images suggest it reflected Bruguière's enduring interest in the idea of light as a creative medium. His use of multiple exposures, Anne McCauley suggests, drew directly on the German expressionist cinematic tradition in which 'what the viewer sees is...to be interpreted as what the character is experiencing internally'.<sup>96</sup> The technique was transposed directly to *Beyond this Point*, where Sieveking's text is interwoven with Bruguière's abstract photographs. Newspaper reviewers responded by describing the work as 'Mind Photography' or 'Human Emotions Analysed with the Aid of the Camera'.<sup>97</sup> Since the two men were meeting regularly in this period, for lunch or shared trips to the London Film Society's screenings, it is inconceivable that they could have avoided discussion of film techniques more broadly and how they might be transposed to the medium of sound. Sieveking and Bruguière presented the book itself as an example of 'Absolute Collaboration', thus explicitly evoking the aesthetic tradition of an art in which colours, shapes, sounds, or images might be released from their usual storytelling functions and become interchangeable.<sup>98</sup> Elsewhere, Sieveking wrote that he had wished to play with the idea that 'all media of art might be translated into each

<sup>95</sup> The details on Bruguière in this paragraph are drawn from McCauley, 'An Experiment'. Although Bruguière is sometimes described as Surrealist, and Paul Nash was later associated with Surrealism, there is no reference in Sieveking's work or private papers to suggest a direct interest in Surrealism as such, despite the movement's evident interest in mental states: see N. Matheson, 'The Phantom of Surrealism: Photography, Cultural Identity and the Reception of Surrealism in England', *History of Photography*, 29 (2005), 151–62.

<sup>96</sup> McCauley, 'An Experiment', 53.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in McCauley, 'An Experiment', 47.

<sup>98</sup> See McCauley, 'An Experiment', 48–9.

other'.<sup>99</sup> The project, and his association with Bruguière, thus appears to have propelled Sieveking into a closer engagement with the latest filmic techniques in two ways: it encouraged him to attempt to evoke mental turmoil through sound in much the same way it had been evoked in light; it also encouraged him to start thinking of his radio work as being essentially cinematic in form.

Sieveking was already sympathetic to cinematic sensibilities at a deeply personal level. In 1913, he had gone to the Scala in London to witness the 'Kinoplastikon', which promised 'singing, talking, moving picture figures in solid stereoscopic relief, without a screen'—in effect, a kind of 3D motion picture with colour and sound.<sup>100</sup> Sieveking recalled watching on the darkened stage two figures appearing as if they had 'sprung from the floor' and then dancing to a waltz, before apparently breaking into pieces: 'Half the woman danced away with half the man in one direction, and the other halves danced away together in the other direction.' Before whatever technical hitch was causing this bizarre apparition had been remedied, the stage filled with more and more people 'passing through each other and rising off the ground'. He had, he later recalled, 'experienced with the full force of wonder and awe the terrific thrill of being present when a miracle is performed'. His imagination, he said, had 'lit up' there and then and henceforth he longed 'to be allowed to play with this huge mad toy'.<sup>101</sup> As far as he was concerned, cinema—just like radio, flying, or the telephone—had always been too 'exciting and stimulating' to ignore.<sup>102</sup>

Even so, the association with Bruguière in 1927–8 came at a particularly important stage in British cinema history. On the eve of the coming of sound, it was broadly acknowledged that experimental silent film had reached something of a creative zenith. By 1928, according to Kenneth Macpherson writing in the film journal *Close-Up*, cinema had become not just an art but also an indispensable means of 'visualizing modern consciousness'.<sup>103</sup> It was also deeply implicated in an inter-war culture of modernist experimentation and, as Laura Marcus shows, ideas about time, repetition, movement, emotion, vision, sound, and silence were all 'threaded through' writing on cinema and writing influenced by cinema.<sup>104</sup> One recurring trope concerned the way cinema was able to generate new and unprecedented relations of time and space, alternately telescoping and stretching its field of action

<sup>99</sup> Sieveking; Sketches.

<sup>100</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford: John Johnson Collection: Cinema: Box 2: Scala Cinema Programme, 4 August 1913.

<sup>101</sup> Sieveking; Sketches; *Bioscope*, 20 March 1913.

<sup>102</sup> Sieveking; Sketches.

<sup>103</sup> K. Macpherson, 'As Is', *Close Up* II: 2 (February, 1928), 8, quoted in L. Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford, 2007), 1.

<sup>104</sup> Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 1.

through the act of editing.<sup>105</sup> As Alexander Bashky wrote in 1927, cinema thus allowed for ‘a new sense of hovering in time in any direction we may wish – in fact of moulding time – rearranging its natural sequences, compressing it into a single moment or expanding it into an infinity’.<sup>106</sup> Movement was another concern, with much discussion about film’s creation of an overall rhythmic effect through its rapid succession of images. This was particularly important as an aesthetic focus because the bodily motions or gestures supplied by actors, as well as the combined rhythmic effect of whole sequences, were increasingly read as the visual expression of people’s mental states or emotions. So, as Michael North points out, the film camera had come to serve ‘as one of modernity’s most powerful emblems of the subjectivity of perception and knowledge’.<sup>107</sup> More particularly, in a society through which Freudian ideas were percolating, cinema was increasingly written about as supplying a visual language of dreams, capable, as Marcus puts it, of expressing an ‘archaic consciousness’.<sup>108</sup>

There was also a wider culture of lively debate swirling around cinema, from which a practitioner working in another medium, such as Sieveking, might easily draw. The London Film Society, founded in 1925, had, for instance, quickly become ‘a central component of alternative film culture in Britain’, not least because of its fashionable and eclectic Sunday afternoon programmes, which exposed the capital’s cultural elite to the more ‘advanced’ techniques of foreign films—especially those from Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>109</sup> By 1928 there had also been the first appearance of the serious cineaste’s journal *Close-Up* and a growing number of regular film columns in daily and weekly newspapers—among the most influential being those written by C. A. Lejeune in the *Manchester Guardian* and (from 1928) *the Observer*, and by Iris Barry in the *Spectator* and (from 1925) the *Daily Mail*.<sup>110</sup> This provided a commentary on all aspects of cinema, but, as Marcus suggests, towards the close of the 1920s ‘it was the coming of sound and “the talkies” that dominated discussions of film in every forum, demanding a re-evaluation of tenets that had come to define the medium’.<sup>111</sup> Essentialists feared, in particular, that sound would detract

<sup>105</sup> Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 4–6. See also S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

<sup>106</sup> A. Bashky, ‘The New Art of the Moving Picture’, *Theatre Arts Monthly* XI (1927), 280–1, quoted in Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 18.

<sup>107</sup> M. North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (Oxford, 2005), 4.

<sup>108</sup> Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 39.

<sup>109</sup> J. Sexton, ‘The Film Society and the Creation of an Alternative Film Culture in Britain in the 1920s’, in A. Higson, ed., *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896–1930* (Exeter, 2002), 291–2.

<sup>110</sup> Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 236–8.

<sup>111</sup> Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 239.

from the purity of a new visual language barely out of its infancy. Visually rich examples of the cinematic art such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), screened by the Film Society in March 1926, were therefore celebrated for their non-realist, Expressionist look—as, increasingly, were Soviet films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928), screened at the Society in November 1929, celebrated, in turn, for their dynamic montage style. A native British documentary movement was even on the verge of being born, since John Grierson's foundational film *Drifters* (1929) was also screened in London on the same day as *Potemkin*.<sup>112</sup>

Sieveking was clearly absorbing enough of these debates to declare by 1934 that 'the making of cinema-films has always been an art closely allied to the making of radio plays, and the two are drawing closer every day'.<sup>113</sup> As a radio producer, he had, he claimed, been 'digging' since 1926 in much the same territory as the filmmakers. Indeed, he had 'been thinking along exactly the same lines' as influential figures such as the Soviet director V. I. Pudovkin.<sup>114</sup> This reference to Pudovkin was timely. Though less well-known among the wider public than Sergei Eisenstein, who had given a series of lectures on subjects such as the 'montage of attractions' under the auspices of the Film Society in November 1929, it was Pudovkin who had been the first to explore his craft at book length, with the publication in 1929 of the English translation of *Film Technique*—revised, expanded, and re-issued in 1933.<sup>115</sup> This drew heavily from his earlier essays and addresses, including one on 'Asynchronism as a Principle of Sound Film' and another on 'Rhythmic Problems in My First Sound Film'.<sup>116</sup> It was, however, Pudovkin's essay on 'Close-Ups in Time', published in the *Observer* in January 1932, which attracted Sieveking's attention first. The Soviet director had described watching drops of water during a rain storm and a man working with a gleaming scythe—viscerally intense moments which he had believed could only be recreated on film by 'slowing' the action through editing together a combination of shots taken at a variety of speeds. 'Why should not a given detail be momentarily emphasised by retarding it on the screen', he asked, 'rendering it by this means particularly outstanding and unprecedentedly clear?'<sup>117</sup> In his 1934 book Sieveking quotes this passage word-for-word, though only to point out that what Pudovkin had

<sup>112</sup> Drazin, 'Cavalcanti', 47.

<sup>113</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 33.

<sup>114</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 34–5.

<sup>115</sup> Pudovkin's film *Mother* had also been screened at the Film Society in 1928, a full year before Eisenstein's *Potemkin*: see Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 269–72.

<sup>116</sup> V. I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique: Five Essays and Two Addresses*, Translated and annotated by I. Montagu, Enlarged Edition (London, 1933).

<sup>117</sup> Pudovkin, *Film Technique*, 148.



thus attempted between 1930 and 1932, he himself had *already* achieved in a radio play of his called *Intimate Snapshots*, broadcast in November 1929. In *Intimate Snapshots*, Sieveking—who had no recourse to editing, and was thus working live—had asked an actor to slow down her speech as she approached the microphone while a gramophone disc playing music in the background was also deliberately slowed down in tandem. Thus, he had ‘so to speak, *slow-motioned* small pieces of speech in several places, sometimes in order to emphasise the meaning of words as words, and sometimes in order to give them special significance as sound-form’.<sup>118</sup>

Though careful to point out that he had beaten Pudovkin to the technique by 1 year, Sieveking’s real point was that ‘a man absorbed in thinking about the cinema will come upon identical problems and similar solutions to those encountered by a man absorbed in thinking about radio-plays’.<sup>119</sup> He thus exemplified in the arena of broadcasting what David Trotter describes as the phenomenon of ‘parallelism’, in which techniques regarded as essentially ‘cinematic’ are better seen as offering artists in *every* medium new possibilities for conveying the human experience.<sup>120</sup> Sieveking, indeed, was an outrider for British radio, alert to, and informed by a whole series of contemporary trends in which various arts borrowed freely from each other and recognized common concerns. Even with respect to film, he did not restrict himself to comparisons with Pudovkin. He also referenced German productions such as Paul Czinner’s tragedy *Dreaming Lips* (1932), and Georg Pabst’s realistic recreation of a mining disaster, *Kameradschaft* (1931).<sup>121</sup> These, he suggested, showed how both radio and film could together develop the art of ‘naturalistic sound’, and how each could use new ideas such as the ‘tracking-shot’, the cross-fade, and the jump-cut. Beyond film, he repeatedly compared his own work with painting, poetry, and music.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, it was with a nod to the German concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that he dabbled, not just with the ‘Absolute Collaboration’ of the Bruguière project, but also began in 1929 working with Adrian Klein on an exhibition of ‘colour music’, inviting people to match pictures in a gallery to music being played on a nearby gramophone.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 35–8. *Intimate Snapshots* also made use of ‘found’ sounds for the first time on British radio: these were recorded in the London Underground.

<sup>119</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 39.

<sup>120</sup> D. Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Oxford, 2007), 3–6.

<sup>121</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 41–3.

<sup>122</sup> The contents page of Sieveking’s *Stuff of Radio* includes this précis of the book: ‘Observations about a new art, comparing its technique with that of other arts, such as: Theatre, Television, Novel, Talking Picture, Opera, Poem, Music, and Silent Film. Also an account of the Mystery of Painting with Sound...’

<sup>123</sup> Sieveking: Sketches.

It was, though, the specific question of montage—and the role of sound as a rhythmic element in montage—which seemed most pertinent to Sieveking's attempt to achieve artistic status for his chosen medium of radio and which ensured that through programmes such as *The Kaleidoscope* he was fully engaged in the cinematic debates of the time. In the silent films of Pudovkin and Eisenstein, as well as in Walter Ruttmann's quasi-documentary *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927), screened at the London Film Society in the year of its release, montage had obviously operated at the largely visual level: ideas were conveyed through a succession of images by means of their relationship with each other—a relationship that was either complementary or in sharp juxtaposition. *Berlin*, for example, opened with a series of visual dissolves: a close-up of gently rippling water over which the camera tracked, before dissolving into a geometric pattern of horizontal lines, which, as they increased in intensity and speed, came to resemble railway crossings; as the scene ended, viewers would have found themselves on a train accelerating in time with the accompanying musical score.<sup>124</sup> Since we know that Sieveking was attending the Film Society with Bruguière that year; it is reasonable to assume he had seen *Berlin*. In any case, in *The Kaleidoscope*, made just 1 year later, Sieveking deploys strikingly similar 'dissolves' in the acoustical realm. In the opening scene, for example, the clapping of a theatrical audience is heard cross-faded with what the script describes as 'sea effects', while two voices argued over whether it was in fact clapping or the 'rumble and swish of the many sounding waters of the sea' that was being heard. *The Kaleidoscope's* opening dissolve thus makes full use of the inherent ambiguity and uncertainty of sound, just as *Berlin* had made use of the ambiguity of certain images. In fact Sieveking made quite explicit the parallel between his own approach and recent cinematic techniques, because in his opening announcement he drew listeners' attention to another German film from 1927—one more likely to have resonated with members of the British public. Listeners, the script said, should expect 'moving pattern effects' like those 'in a modern film such as "Metropolis"'. The reference to Fritz Lang's film probably refers most directly to certain sequences in which Lang either splits the screen or superimposes images upon one another.<sup>125</sup> For instance, in the celebrated sequence in which the robot Maria dances sensually before an audience of men, her gyrations had been combined with a similar composite shot of grossly expanded eyes. An example of Lang's use of

<sup>124</sup> N. M. Alter, 'Berlin, Symphony of a Great City (1927): City, Image, Sound', in N. Isenberg, ed., *Weimar Cinema* (New York, 2009), 193–215.

<sup>125</sup> For a discussion of *Metropolis* and Lang's techniques, see: I. Roberts, *German Expressionist Cinema: The World of Light and Shadow* (London, 2008); A. Kaes, 'Metropolis (1927): City, Cinema, Modernity', in Isenberg, *Weimar Cinema*, 173–91.

overlaid dissolves had come when the gigantic turbine of the city's machine room transformed itself into the gaping jaws of a fuming monster.<sup>126</sup> In *The Kaleidoscope*, Sieveking's use of the aural equivalent, namely long cross-fades between two layers of sound, was pervasive. About 10 minutes into the programme, for instance, listeners would have heard an extended sequence which presaged the coming of the First World War by means of superimposing and cross-fading over one another the sound of marching feet, Russian, British, French, and German national anthems, and one of Rupert Brooke's poems. On several occasions in the course of the programme, jazz could be heard struggling to gain dominance over music from the classical repertoire, the former suggestive of 'degenerate' influences and the latter of 'civilizing' influences.

Perhaps the most striking parallel, however, between cinema's use of visual montage and Sieveking's emergent use of radiogenic montage comes at certain moments in his script where the programme's title is printed in shouting capital letters: 'KALEIDOSCOPE'. At these points, an especially dramatic eruption evidently took place, with sound effects, orchestras, choirs, and actors all simultaneously faded to maximum in order to create a sense of climactic disorientation through a wall of noise. In effect, listeners would have experienced the aural equivalent of a sudden 'twist' of a toy kaleidoscope in which fragments of coloured glass were rearranged into new patterns. In Sieveking's radio manifestation, the first such twist took place in the midst of war, with the sounds of a musical box, a dance band, some soldiers singing 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', and a passage from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony all mixed together. This complex multi-layering of sound then slowly resolved into a jazz tune, out of which emerged a voice reciting Tennyson's *Song of the Lotos-Eaters*, before, finally, the chaos subsided and a more settled rhythm returned. Indeed, the change of pace at points such as this was an important part of Sieveking's project. *The Kaleidoscope* was, after all, subtitled 'A Rhythm representing the Life of a Man from Cradle to Grave'. And, as the BBC's Head of Drama, Val Gielgud later explained, 'the operative word is "Rhythm"': 'this was no scrapbook of unrelated bits and pieces, its pages jerked by a philistine hand. *Here was a rhythm which flowed*', he recalled: it had a 'compulsive effect'.<sup>127</sup>

Any similarity between Sieveking's approach and that of the film directors most closely associated with montage went beyond experiment-for-experiment's-sake, however. Lang's *Metropolis* had deployed a series of stark contrasts, most notably that between the faceless workers

<sup>126</sup> Kaes, 'Metropolis', 179–80.

<sup>127</sup> Gielgud, *Radio Drama*, 24–9. Emphasis added by author.

servicing the insatiable machinery in the lower reaches of the city and the rich and powerful frolicking in the pleasure parks above, in order to dramatize the latent conflicts in German society in the 1920s.<sup>128</sup> *The Kaleidoscope*, similarly, was constructed around a binary struggle, in this case between the 'Good' and 'Bad' influences on an individual's life. This was expressed aurally not just in the clashes between jazz and classical music; it also came through a constant cutting back-and-forth between scenes representing good memories and those representing bad memories, as well as through a cross-cutting between voices of conscience and voices of temptation. In particular, the moments of climactic noise in which Sieveking twisted his kaleidoscope were, as he told his listeners at the outset, designed to 'represent the struggle' in his character's 'mind'. He was to adopt the same approach in one of his later novels, *Smite and Spare Not* (1933), where, at one point, as the narrator puts it, 'the whirling kaleidoscope of events took charge' and 'the past, the present, and the future were coming over him as though each of the three were a piece of the contracting iris in a camera'.<sup>129</sup>

His use in the 1928 radio programme of a climactic layering of sounds to represent the same conflicted or confused mental state needs to be understood in the context of an even more pervasive cultural phenomenon. As James Mansell has demonstrated, noise, and its effect on modern life, 'greatly exercised many Britons in the inter-war period'.<sup>130</sup> Whereas Futurists such as Luigi Russolo had advanced 'noise music' as a way to symbolize, even celebrate, the vibrancy of new urban and industrial life, most Britons, Mansell points out, regarded noise as 'a painful and disturbing by-product of technological modernity'; the medical profession even feared that continuing exposure to noise was creating irreversibly neurotic populations.<sup>131</sup> In this respect, Sieveking was certainly more in tune with native neurasthenic anxieties than with any Futurist celebrations of sonic

<sup>128</sup> Kaes, 'Metropolis', 174. See also Roberts, *German Expressionist Cinema*, 64–7.

<sup>129</sup> L. Sieveking, *Smite and Spare Not* (London, 1933), 210. Sieveking's central metaphor of the kaleidoscope, if not original, was at least in tune with other writers attempting to convey the constant slippage between moments of order and of disintegration which they felt characterized subjective experience. In *The Soul of London* (1905), for instance, F. M. Ford had described a train journey as conjuring 'a vague kaleidoscope picture' of fleeting impressions and memories: see S. Haslam, *Frammenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel and the Great War* (Manchester, 2002), 120. Dorothy Richardson, too, in early volumes of her monumental work *Pilgrimage*, had interwoven biography and the optics of a kaleidoscope, deploying it as a kind of *technology* of memory: see Marcus, *Tenth Muse*, 149. For both authors—and, it would appear, for Sieveking—the kaleidoscope, as Sara Haslam puts it, captured metaphorically the way experience was, 'always changing, always made new', an ever-changing combination of past and present jumbled together: Haslam, *Frammenting Modernism*, 9.

<sup>130</sup> J. Mansell, 'Rhythm, Modernity, and the Politics of Sound', in Anthony and Mansell, *Projection of Britain*, 161.

<sup>131</sup> Mansell, 'Rhythm', 161.

chaos. Just 4 months before the programme he had written to his mother from France while recuperating from his breakdown. 'I don't care for Paris', he had told her: 'it is too noisy'.<sup>132</sup> A little later, he was back in London 'all of a tremble' at the sound of cars outside his home.<sup>133</sup> Noise, then, represented confusion, irritation, and mental instability for Sieveking. When he deployed moments of 'tumultuous noise' in his programmes, it was surely in order to represent in sonic form as vividly as he could a state of mental confusion.

There was one area in which Sieveking's radio programmes broke entirely new ground, and presaged the arrival not so much of sound film as of television. Whereas filmmakers achieved their montage effects through cutting pre-recorded material, such was the primitive nature of sound recording at the BBC in the late-1920s that Sieveking's programmes all had to be created live at the point of transmission. The main challenge was therefore this: how to weave a multi-layered composition, or switch smoothly between different time-frames or places, all in a single 'take' conducted live before the listeners. When producing the BBC's first 'fantasy' for radio, *The Wheel of Time*, in 1926, Sieveking had struggled, and failed horribly. The programme—three skits on the past, the present, and the future—featured the musical talents of Constant Lambert and William Walton, and the acting talents of Isadora Duncan's protégé, Elsa Lanchester, as well as Edith Sitwell, and her brothers Osbert and Sacheverell: a glittering array of modernist figures. In one sequence, Walton and Edith Sitwell re-enacted extracts from *Façade*, an avant-garde hit of 1923 in which Sitwell, concealed behind a curtain, had recited poems to Walton's score through a megaphone. In *The Wheel of Time*, Sieveking's goal was to suggest that 'today holds always an echo of yesterday and a note of tomorrow'. So a multi-layering of sounds was needed to ensure the different eras overlapped with one another on air. Yet with everyone—orchestra, artists, sound-effects technicians, a small audience, Sieveking himself—crammed into the same acoustic space, and therefore with at least one microphone in the room always 'live', it had proved impossible for the producer to direct the various elements while keeping silent himself. In the event, the programme overran. As a panicking Sieveking shoved Walton aside to conduct the orchestra himself at breakneck speed, the programme was brutally faded-out mid-flow for the immovable chimes of Big Ben.<sup>134</sup>

By 1928, however, Sieveking had the Dramatic Control Panel at his disposal, allowing him to sit apart from the action, place the various participants in seven different studios, and blend their output at will.

<sup>132</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 27 May 1928.

<sup>133</sup> LLS: Correspondence: 20 June 1929.

<sup>134</sup> *Radio Times*, 27 August 1926; Sieveking: Sketches.

This placed new physical and mental demands on Sieveking. The fiendishly complex handwritten notes to his working script of *The Kaleidoscope* testify to the speed with which his fingers had to dance across the console and flick knobs back and forth. Val Gielgud worked on the broadcast as a studio manager and recalled Sieveking not so much operating the panel as *playing* it.<sup>135</sup> Dressed in white tie and tails he had entered the studio as ‘one imagines a young composer might have entered the Opera House at, say, Prague in 1840, to conduct for the first time an opera of his own composition’. His fingers knew what to do, Sieveking wrote, ‘just as they do on the piano or the cello’: ‘it was play, play, *play* the instrument if ever you did anything in your life’.<sup>136</sup> As with music, of course, there would be nothing left after the final notes had faded away: ‘the whole of my complex, lovely picture, with its voices, its castles, its landscapes, its musics, its men and women, had been painted on the underside of a cloud’.<sup>137</sup> Yet the very nature of *The Kaleidoscope* as both live and unavoidably ephemeral was, in Sieveking’s eyes, precisely what made it special. It was a once-only experience, indeed a *performance*, where, as he conceived it, ‘I open my little museum, my Diorama, my Panopticon—and take, I hope, your pennies at the door’.<sup>138</sup> Film, he wrote, was ‘canned’: ‘made and stored up, and put out in a state of fixed preservation’; in radio, by contrast, ‘what is heard is *real*, in that its voices are the voices of men and women alive at that moment of hearing’.<sup>139</sup> As a result, he believed, broadcasting—radio or television—was capable of establishing a sudden and powerful ‘mental contact’ between creator and listener.<sup>140</sup> This elevation of liveness also defined the status of the producer working in broadcasting, positioning him as much more than a mechanical operative. A musical score, Sieveking explained, could be performed and conducted reasonably consistently by anyone, anywhere, at any time, based as it was on a universally recognized language. Even a traditional radio play composed entirely of dialogue could be executed in this fashion. But the radio *he* made was ‘written in a sort of shorthand peculiar to the writer’, the script merely a basis for interpretation: ‘No two producers would make anything like the same result’.<sup>141</sup> In short, as well as formulating an art of radio, Sieveking had started to formulate for British radio the idea of the individual producer as *auteur*.

<sup>135</sup> Gielgud, *Radio Drama*, 28.

<sup>136</sup> Sieveking; *Sketches*.

<sup>137</sup> Sieveking; *Sketches*.

<sup>138</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 30.

<sup>139</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 51.

<sup>140</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 28, 51.

<sup>141</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 30.

### Conclusion: Aftermath

Sieveking's programmes were never universally acclaimed. As the *Saturday Review* put it in 1929, 'Most people hate them. They are too bothersome for the ordinary listener, too childish for the intellectuals.'<sup>142</sup> There were also strong doubts expressed by the BBC's head of drama, Val Gielgud, who feared that producers such as Sieveking 'concentrated more upon knobs and switches than upon actors and acting' and that listeners had become laboratory rats in someone's private experiment.<sup>143</sup> For his part Sieveking refused the label of obscurantist. He believed there was always enough familiar content, both in music and speech, to help guide an audience. Intelligibility, he said, was vital: a scene change, however done, 'must not leave an atom of doubt in the listener's mind as to its change'.<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, programmes such as *The Kaleidoscope* were very obviously in advance of anything else then appearing on the BBC's output. Unquestionably, they were Sieveking's boldest attempt to make good his own firm belief that 'The serious artist must paint in the real spirit of how own time, and not in the spirit of a past age.'<sup>145</sup> In 1928, for him personally, that meant 'painting in sound' in a way that drew heavily on a rich brew of new ideas in psychology and the arts. The contemporary fashion for exploring the 'inner topography of the self' translated into programmes that were not just autobiographical, but which tried to conjure in sound the subjective experience of a mind bombarded with sensations and memories.

A high-water mark in modernist cinema had also coincided with his work at the BBC, and he was, as he claimed, working on 'identical problems and similar solutions' to those facing film directors at the time. Programmes such as *The Kaleidoscope* represented an attempt to establish for British broadcasting a tradition of montage in sound that was as exciting and attention-grabbing as that being promoted in cinema by, say, Eisenstein and Pudovkin at the Film Society and in the pages of cineaste journals such as *Close-Up*. He was able to make out a good case that his ideas about sound had developed in synchronicity. Moreover, *The Kaleidoscope's* broadcast in September 1928, and that of programmes such as *Intimate Snapshots* the following year, came at a tantalizing and short-lived moment: a point in time when experimental radio might actually *anticipate* work in experimental film. Directors such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Ruttmann, Lang, and Cavalcanti would all be embarking on what the Brazilian director called the 'hard learning of sound'.<sup>146</sup> There was therefore much discussion in cinema circles about

<sup>142</sup> *Saturday Review*, 30 November 1929.

<sup>143</sup> Gielgud, *Radio Drama*, 60, 26.

<sup>144</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 98.

<sup>145</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 62.

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Drazin, 'Cavalcanti', 45.

how exactly the principles of visual montage might be enhanced, rather than abandoned, through the addition of soundtracks. Pudovkin for instance, told the Film Society in February 1929 that he wished to avoid using sound effects 'perfectly synchronised with their corresponding visual images on the screen'. Sounds, he suggested, should be wedded to images in a more complex, sometimes asynchronous way—'in the same way', for instance, 'as that in which two or more melodies can be combined by an orchestra'.<sup>147</sup> We now know this approach had already been adumbrated by Sieveking. Having taken his techniques from silent cinema and then translated it from images to sounds, he offered a tantalizing model for how sound montage might, in turn, be incorporated within film. When the GPO Film Unit first mixed the incidental sounds of everyday life in creative combination with speech and music in films such as *The Song of Ceylon* (1934) or *Night Mail* (1936), Cavalcanti's arrival in Britain in 1934 was obviously influential. But a native tradition already existed: Sieveking had provided British audiences with a well-publicized example of complex and rhythmic sound as early as 1928. He had also incorporated 'found sounds' into radio programmes as early as 1929—5 years before the GPO Unit did likewise on screen.<sup>148</sup> 'It is illuminating', he commented wryly in 1934, 'to have our own tricks done back to us'.<sup>149</sup>

If Sieveking's pioneering work with sound went unnoticed or unacknowledged among filmmakers, it undoubtedly influenced a generation of British radio producers. It is certainly the case that after a period of relative openness in the 1920s, the BBC became a more conservative, bureaucratic entity in the 1930s. But this interpretation now needs to be modified in order to recognize the continuity—however limited—of a tradition initiated by Sieveking. More than 20 years after its broadcast, Val Gielgud decided that, whatever his initial doubts, *The Kaleidoscope* had 'made a great and recognizable contribution to the development that followed'.<sup>150</sup> A senior BBC figure once suggested that Sieveking was an 'idea machine' who 'taught' others; Gielgud reckoned 'less audacious producers benefitted from his mistakes'.<sup>151</sup> This, no doubt, was why many radio dramas and features from the 1930s onwards adopted the multi-layered 'mosaic' techniques he had introduced in 1928, though in more restrained fashion.<sup>152</sup> One of those who had joined Sieveking's short-lived Programme Research

<sup>147</sup> BFI Special Collections: The Film Society Collection, Item 6 (b): Film Society Projects: copy of speech from Pudovkin's address to the Film Society, 6 February 1929.

<sup>148</sup> See Mansell, 'Rhythm', 161–7.

<sup>149</sup> Sieveking, *Stuff*, 41.

<sup>150</sup> BBC Written Archives Centre: File T5/534, Memo: Gielgud to Barry, 16 November 1951.

<sup>151</sup> Gielgud, *Radio Drama*, 26.

<sup>152</sup> Frattarola, 'Microphone', 450–53; Crisell, 'Better than Magritte', 464–73.



Department was Archie Harding, who later went on to work with Ezra Pound on his BBC 'Radio Operas'. Harding drew on what Margaret Fisher acknowledges was a 'highly charged' production culture where 'technological and artistic discoveries were daily events'.<sup>153</sup> As the 1930s progressed radio, like film, was increasingly infused with a social documentary impulse. But even the BBC's seminal programmes of social observation, such as Geoffrey Bridson's *Steel* (1937), *Cotton, Wool*, and *Coal* (all 1938), were richly layered, even poetic, in a way that Sieveking and his GPO counterpart Alberto Cavalcanti would surely both have recognized.<sup>154</sup> Harding and Bridson therefore helped establish a tradition of the 'radio feature' that endured. This highly textured montage genre, existing somewhere on the border between reportage and drama—a place where, as one contemporary of Sieveking's put it, 'every moment of experience could be grist to the microphone'—is still heard on BBC Radio 3 and BBC Radio 4.<sup>155</sup> It is Sieveking's most enduring bequest. Yet even his momentary fame in 1928 should also be appreciated for what it was at the time. The 'synthesis' of forms and sounds that lay at the heart of *The Kaleidoscope*, drawing as it did on both his own life and the very latest ideas in art and cinema, was symbolic of Sieveking's larger achievement. It was vivid proof that his chosen medium, radio, and his chosen institution, the BBC, were far from being the closed and insular worlds that some assumed. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, largely through Sieveking's efforts, both were woven a little more closely into the rich fabric of British modernist culture.

<sup>153</sup> Fisher, *Radio Operas*, 3.

<sup>154</sup> See P. Scannell and D. Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, Vol. 1: 1922–1939* (Oxford, 1991), 338–50.

<sup>155</sup> Fielden, *Natural Bent*, 110.