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Afterword radio modernisms: features, cultures and the BBC

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Afterword

The essays contained in this special issue of *Media History* collectively represent an exciting leap forward in our understanding of the intricate ties between radio and modernism. As Amanda Wrigley's and Aasiya Lodhi's 'Introduction' hints, there was a time in the not-too-distant past when historians of radio and literary scholars gave the impression of pursuing very different concerns. Those trained in the analysis of written texts and knowledgeable about the lives of those who created them were the first to explore in detail just how much the great modernist authors of the early 20th century – Joyce, Woolf, Pound – were fascinated in the new medium of radio. The focus, however, was very much on how such writers' engagements with broadcasting influenced their *own* craft, or on how these authors were able to capture imaginatively in written form the ripples of change wrought by the arrival of this novel communicative technology, the feel and rhythms of a newly 'mediatized' world. The radio-ness of radio was important, the broadcasting institutions themselves - and the creative practices within them - less so. Unfairly, perhaps, the impression was created that broadcasting was of less interest to literary scholars because it was not seen as a locus of modernist creativity in and of itself. Historians of radio, in the meantime, were traditionally concerned with modernity rather than with modernism: with how radio as a cultural form 'fitted into' a modern society characterised by mass consumption, declining opportunities for face-to-face interactions, expanding leisure activities for those in work, and decisive moves towards universal suffrage. These historians had the literary scholars to thank for providing them with original, highly granular analyses of individual 'texts' – programmes, scripts, and creative works in other media inspired by sound. So they got on with what interested them rather more: mapping the growth and development of radio as a set of institutional structures and practices. Instinctively these scholars saw radio, to varying degrees, as *sui generis*. It spoke of an unfortunate disciplinary tendency towards medium-centricity. But it was a narrowness of attention which did at least mean radio was recognised as its own locus of creativity.

If there was a failure for these two perspectives immediately to connect, it was, perhaps, because so much of what was actually created in radio was – and indeed has continued to be - either routine and banal, or, even when complex and original, has deliberately *effaced* all the effort involved in its making. This is why the work of radio has always appeared to the casual observer to be a rather simple affair, more a case of administration than art. And it is why any radio that has had pretensions to being explicitly modernist has seemed, to many 'mainstream' media scholars, too much of an outlier to deserve sustained attention. In the last resort, it was seen as something grandiose and baroque - a mere *curiosity*, not the *real* business of broadcasting.

Thankfully, the feedback loops in radio's relationship with modernism - and modernism's relationship with radio – have since been well and truly exposed. Literary scholars have

revealed their interest in the inner workings of radio; radio scholars have unveiled some long-suppressed literary sensibilities of their own. And the pairing of these two terms, 'radio' and 'modernism' has provided contemporary scholarship with one of the true success stories of that much-sought though rarely achieved thing, cross-disciplinarity. The Introduction to this present collection, again, pays due acknowledgement to the foundational work done in this regard, especially over the past decade. It also reminds us that some earlier work of broadcasting history, published in the 1980s, was perhaps more alert to these cross-currents of influence than we might once have realised. Moreover, it reveals broadcasting itself – and, in particular, the BBC – to be rather less monolithic in its creative processes than was once assumed. The essays here build on – and give added momentum – to this cross-disciplinary trend. They are truly expansive: collectively they stretch our foci of attention in both time and space and introduce us to some entirely new concerns. They also nudge us towards thinking differently about areas we might otherwise have regarded as already fully known. Though they each tackle very different objects of study, taken together they allow the emergence of some common themes – themes that bind even more closely together not just radio and modernism but the two scholarly communities which study them.

For instance, one thing that keeps coming through as a shared point of interest is collage. The simultaneous and enduring fascination among both writers and radio producers with using montage techniques to remove the 'centring' effect of an omnipotent narrator is evident in almost every essay. We see it plainly in Todd Avery's insightful exploration of the metaphorical power of 'waves', both in Tyrone Guthrie's radio work and Virginia Woolf's writings, and again in Alex Goody's thorough exposition of the contrast between the BBC's 'polyphonic' wartime features and Nazi radio's more concentrated styles of vocal address. It is there, too, in Kate Lacey's thoughtful unpicking of the early radio schedule's 'bricolage' character. And we find it in Alexandra Lawrie's sharp analysis of *In Parenthesis* (1946). As always in radio, voices are disembodied. But Lawrie shows how, in the hands of a skilled dramatist, this unavoidable aesthetic reality allowed radio to adopt a constructively playful approach to the hierarchies and relationships of an established text: Douglas Cleverdon's production gave us vocal images juxtaposed in allusive and sometimes jarring ways, allowing for surprising combinations of style and texture – and some exhilarating jumps through history. We hear soldiers and battles from the past as well as the present: spectral armies and the different ages kissing and co-mingling, a splicing together of the earthy voices of the trenches and the mythic language of the Bible and the Welsh bards. This characteristic 'pull-and-push of space and time', which collage so wonderfully enables, also emerges in Aasiya Lodhi's discussion of Louis MacNeice's travel features. The lack of narrative signposting in MacNeice's city portraits allowed the various voices and sounds heard floating out of the radio set to escape the constraining specificities of hard geography, as if they were floating freely across earthly borders. It made for radio that was richly suggestive of the 'uncanny displacements' which seemed to characterize modern life. Here,

and in many other examples scattered across these essays, we find in the phenomena analysed a fertile tangle of montage, polyphony, contrapuntalism, disjuncture, multiple time-frames. And lurking behind it all: *subjectivity*. In the twentieth century, thanks to Einstein, radio and literature found themselves in a new and somewhat disorientating age of relativity, where the notion of objective truth and a singular viewpoint was being overthrown in science, in philosophy, in culture. In one sense, when we talk of 'radio modernisms', we are talking about radio and literature – separately and jointly – searching for the right grammar to express this new, complex, and somewhat destabilising reality.

Invoking Einstein has its risks. It suggests something wholly abstract, difficult, rarefied. This would be misleading if we were to neglect another, rather different trope weaving its way through this collection. Yoked closely to the modernist fascination with subjectivity is a shared concern with the *everyday*, and specifically with the kaleidoscopic nature of lived experience. Writers such as Virginia Woolf bent their sentences and paragraphs into a form capable of evoking the rush of sensory stimulation which constituted the moment-by-moment experience of daily life. But radio, always more demotic in its aspirations, and always fully cognisant of its domestic, taken-for-granted character, embraced the 'ordinary' wholesale. Hence even in Alexandra Lawrie's high-art example of *In Parenthesis*, while the structure and form might be complex and demanding, the content is shown to be almost always richly human and multisensory – full of the sights and sounds and fears and hopes and apprehensions of flesh-and-blood characters. For the most part, radio has always represented the ordinary as more than just an averaging out of individual experiences. As Kate Lacey shows, this was manifest from the very beginning in the concept of the schedule. If this constantly updated listing of unending broadcast output was somehow akin to the nation's collective stream of consciousness, it certainly suggested something rather complex, even incoherent. Before routine and ratings tamed it, the schedule embodied a flow of programmes which, differing as they did in subject-matter, tone and difficulty, recognized the multiple identities and dispositions of the many millions of listeners. It is, perhaps, why radio scholars have always been uncomfortable with their object of study being labelled a *mass* medium. Not just radio scholars, either. For as Charlotte Stevens and John Wyver show in their essay, some of the techniques of so-called 'pure radio' were to be found in the more artistically-inclined television documentaries of the post-war era. Those made in Britain by Denis Mitchell and Philip Donnellan were, they argue, particularly striking. They shared with radio a delight in sharp, destabilising juxtapositions, which kept a didactic, monologic narrative at bay and replaced it with something more richly allusive and impressionistic; they were also essentially portraits of ordinary, everyday life - works of art profoundly interested in people *as people*, not just people as token embodiments of social processes and institutions. Leonie Thomas's study of Una Marson is pertinent too, in this respect. Her essay reveals an intriguing shift in Marson's own poetry voice as her career progressed, and finally faltered: under the influence of working for BBC radio in London, and what appeared to be a growing consciousness of her 'outsider' status there, her lines

became less florid, less enamoured of traditional language, and more reflective of her Caribbean roots: more spiky and hard-edged, more demotic. In radio and literature – again, separately *and* jointly – modernism reveals a consistent effort to give 'voice', imaginatively, to otherwise inexpressible feelings and sensations.

Finally, one is struck by the recurrence throughout these pages of an implicit engagement with rhythm. Though Todd Avery's intention is to draw our attention to the influence of late-Victorian aestheticism in 1920s and 1930s modernism, he does so by revealing the strangely under-reported importance of *musicality*. He invokes afresh that old idea: that all art aspires to the condition of music. And then shows how a range of creative work – notably several of Tyrone Guthrie's plays and both of Lance Sieveking's 'Kaleidoscopes' – stressed their own rhythmic – and sometimes symphonic - qualities. Sieveking's work was subtitled explicitly as 'a Rhythm' in sound, and it was even performed at the BBC's Savoy Hill studios in the manner of a live musical concert, with Sieveking dressing himself in the white tie and tails of an orchestral conductor as he sat hunched over the studio mixing desk. Elsewhere in this collection, we come across the kind of phrases which we might loosely associate with the language of rhythm: we read of pull-and-push, of flow, of counterpoint and lines, of contrast and balance. It is a reminder of the way so many radio practitioners have conceived of their work in terms of 'composing' programmes. And, as Amanda Wrigley shows vividly in her essay on canonical radio features such as *The Rescue* and *The Dark Tower*, this 'fit' between musicality and radio is not just a matter of shared sensibilities or a history of collaboration among the personalities involved (in her particular example, Benjamin Britten, Edward Sackville-West, Louis MacNeice, and Dylan Thomas); nor is it simply an illustration that radio and music are both essentially *time-based* creations. In tracing the 'afterlives' of these features – how they have continued to be performed, re-imagined, and listened-to by new audiences many years after first being broadcast – Wrigley reminds us that radio also has deeper rhythms: rhythms which unfold over the *long durée*. Lance Sieveking once complained of what he called radio's ghastly impermanence. This no longer holds. And it demands of us as scholars that, as far as possible, we situate our 'reading' of modernist radio work in a broader assessment of cultural life, extending far beyond the writing desks of authors and the mixing desks of broadcasters.

To speak of music and of temporal rhythms also surely amounts to a renewed call to pay due attention to the ear: to listen-out for the innate modernisms of radio, rather than reading modernisms into radio. Charlotte Stevens and John Wyver refer to the much-used phrase 'pure radio', while Alex Goody and Amanda Wrigley both deploy that other familiar term, the 'radiogenic'. These are telling uses. In equating modernist techniques and styles with radio being its 'true self', we are in effect suggesting, are we not, that while all art aspires to the condition of music, all radio aspires to the condition of modernism? The danger with this position, one might suppose, is not just that it apparently condemns the vast majority of output as not 'really' radio as it should be, but that the definition of

‘modernist radio’ becomes so all-encompassing that meaning starts to evaporate. For what it is worth, I think there is real virtue in the approach – but only for reasons explored nearly four decades ago, and expressed in words more eloquent than my own, by the novelist Jonathan Raban. He was, he said, suspicious of the term ‘pure radio’ because it too often meant the creation of something ‘technically dazzling’ though rather ‘arid’. What it *should* mean, he suggested, was something rather broader but seemingly contradictory: radio as an intrinsically ‘mongrel form’. One can, for example, hear this mongrel essence in radio’s styles of talk:

> ‘In the course of an hour spent as an idle radio listener, twiddling between stations, one drifts from the most elaborate and carefully scripted language through every shade and tone to the most unofficial and unrehearsed grunts and squawks. On radio there is no median register, no particular way of speaking that could be said to represent the medium in neutral gear, ticking over… Radio is by turns gossipy, authoritative, preachy, natural, artificial, confidential, loudly public, and not infrequently wordless. Its languages bleed into one another. Even the identities of particular channels are constantly being eroded.’
>
> (Jonathan Raban, ‘Icon or symbol: the writer and the “medium”’, in P. Lewis (ed.), *Radio Drama*, London: Longman, 1981, pp. 78-90: 79, 86-87.)

‘Pure radio’, in other words, is radio being its chaotically eclectic self. Which means it is difficult to read Raban’s words and not acknowledge that when we talk of radio modernisms we might have to confront the idea that the most profoundly modernist aspect of radio is what we might call – with a nod to Brecht – the medium’s ‘total effect’. And an exciting – if rather intimidating – conclusion to be drawn is this: that, whether originally inspired by literature or by broadcasting, those of us engaged in studying radio modernisms might need to keep the communication channels open with our ‘mainstream’ media colleagues, and engage more fully with the mosaic of phone-ins, quizzes, magazines and pop music shows that constitute ‘ordinary’ output. For if Raban’s words still hold true, it could just be there, perversely - beyond the classic texts, and amidst the banalities of cheap, mass-produced, daytime radio – that we find the true modernist soul of this endlessly fascinating medium.

(Main text: 2519 words)

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