Radiophonic Ontologies and the Avantgarde

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Introduction

For Artaud, "an expression does not have the same value twice, does not live two lives; [...] all words, once spoken, are dead" ([1938] 1958:75), and this unwholesome aspect of language, when coupled with the incantatory and vibratory properties of radio, propels what Allen Weiss, in an essay on the work of Gregory Whitehead, describes as the project of radio art: "Radiophonic art is guided by the serendipity of a fata morgana, the bewildering, aleatory process of recuperating and rechanneling the lost voice" (1995:79). That is, *in the one ear,* we have the poststructuralist scenario (inaugurated by the scenographemes of Artaud), in which meaning progresses noisily, without stable referent, as one word cannot double or replicate another in intent, force, meaning, or effect. Yet, *in the other ear,* in its struggle to rechannel loss, the art of radiophony attempts to circuit language back to some original, predictable, even replicable source in the living human body, even though this circuit is formed by chance operations in an illusory referential system.

In Whitehead's *Dead Letters* (1994), postal clerks in the dead letter office become an apt subject for the radio artist, as they echo this serendipitous rechanneling of loss in their quixotic attempts to resuscitate nixies and redirect them towards their intended, living addressees. The art of radio, like Luigi Russolo's *Art of Noise*, is invested in "choosing, coordinating, and dominating all noises, [...] enriching mankind with a new unsuspected voluptuousness" ([1911] 1986:171), paradoxically recuperating the referent without mimetically reproducing "life." Reproduced mechanically or mimetically, life is actually death, a paradox that is most obvious in the "live" aesthetics of broadcast media:

> [R]adio is actually at its most lively when most dead. Since the living cast themselves out through the articulated corpses of advanced telecommunications equipment, the whole idea of "live" radio is nothing more than a sensory illusion. [...] The more dead the transmission, the more "alive" the acoustic sensation; the more alive the sensation, the more "dead" the source body has become. (Whitehead 1991:87)

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The sensations of avantgarde radiophonic art, mediated by articulated corpses, are counter-articulations of a life-force behind the death masks of electronic reproduction. If the (electronic) reproduction of life is actually death, then radiophonic sensations are only communicable by an antireproduction based on chance, conjuring up the "body electric." For example, the work of John Cage utilizes aleatory devices in order to inhabit the radiophonic universe without reproducing it in art, pointing in a Zen manner to what cannot be an object of the pointing—the invisible noise of electronic culture, source and substance of radiophonic ontologies. In a *Radio Happening* with Morton Feldman, Cage says,

> But all that radio is, Morty, is making available to your ears what was already in the air and available to your ears, but you couldn't hear it. In other words, all it is is making audible something which you're already in. You are bathed in radio waves. ([1966–1967] 1995:256)

While, in the Cage worldview, a rock is a radio radiating molecular waves, *radiation*—in the post-Enlightenment, post-Chernobyl, and post-ozone world—is that unwholesome glow from which we protect ourselves with the second skins of sunblock, safety procedures, and cynicism.

What the work of much radio art reveals is the struggle to reveal the already there. Many times the desire to reveal the invisible, immaterial, and essentially unrevealable substance of radio (beyond the actual institutions and technology of radio), takes the form of a struggle to manifest the radiophonic as reality itself, part of our basic make-up. Even though radio's ethereal and vaguely metaphysical aspects might seemingly relate it more to superstructure and false ideology than to true matter, radio is a thing of matter, even if it is a matter that struggles to be known, always to be suppressed. While, in the Cage worldview, a rock is a radio radiating molecular waves, *radiation*—in the post-Enlightenment, post-Chernobyl, and post-ozone world—is that unwholesome glow from which we protect ourselves with the second skins of sunblock, safety procedures, and cynicism. Avantgarde radio art attempts to create a sonic bridge through the inscrutability of dead signs (a derma protecting us from the radiation of *the thing itself*) to the real of radio, even though it is fully aware of the impossibility of recovering the real through practices of representation. I will touch upon these particularities of the radiophonic and the avantgarde practice of radio art before discussing the radiophonic aspects of specific experimental dramatists and performers who were obsessed by the simultaneous promises and difficulties of producing an art uniquely "for radio." Along the way, we might find that the term "art radio" is oxymoronic, since it elides the incompatibles of form (art) and noise (radio). The Futurists, Brecht, Artaud, Beckett, and, to some extent, members of the other avantgarde movements (Dada, Expressionism) meditated on the external manifestations of this interiorizing technology, a technology which creates a highly contested space where space is contested, and which provides a context in which stages and scripts may liberate themselves from context itself.

Cage's aforementioned innocence about electronic culture (the dominant paradigm of which, I would argue, is radio, not TV) in the *Radio Happening* is in counterpoint to Feldman's initial cynicism towards Cage's happy ebul-

lience: "I can't conceive of some brat turning on a transistor radio in my face and saying, 'Ah! The environment!'" ([1966–1967] 1995:256). There is a sense that radio reality is not just "there," but that it intrudes and colonizes, its "imaginary landscapes" making impossible "imagined communities," thought, or solitude in an electric company-sponsored disruption. Radio art bridges this ambivalence between celebration (the Cage standpoint)[1] and cynicism (the Feldman standpoint), knowing full well that the risk of life *between* these two points, in the electronic chaos, challenges the importance of artistic personality and aesthetic judgment. (After all, the cybernetic scenario is the locus of authorial death.) More importantly, perhaps, the space between possible judgments *of* electricity is the moment when electricity judges, manipulates, and "bathes" *you*, heralding the loss of coherent bodily sense. Artaud in particular, in giving his body up to electromagnetic waves, became a body without organs. Radio art, as in Marinetti's *Variety Theatre* manifesto, encourages this *fisicofollia* or "body madness" ([1913] 1986:183) of a body under the electrical regime, where inquiries into truth receive static back, unlike the regime of the coherent organism that "knows" itself only because of a highly disciplined closed circuit. Avital Ronell says of a schizophrenic's radiophonic experience:

> Her "word salad" seems to be the result of a recording, registering a number of quasi-autonomous partial systems striving to give simulcast expression to themselves out of the same mouth. [... T]here is a lack of overall ontological boundary. (1989:147)

Radio's most fundamental, ontological feature is precisely this ability to break down ontological borders, a process which is very similar to certain forms of psychosis. There are two dominant forms of psychological disorder that the radio environment mimics and enhances. In the first, the radiophonic universe takes the voice away from the body, stealing words—as in Artaud's paranoid scenario—and transmitting them everywhere. This ability of the radiophonic to steal words and thoughts is evident even in the most wholesome productions of Golden Age radio, all of which, by convention (especially the "thrillers"), have the interior thoughts of the character closest to the microphone "revealed" to the mass audience, so that, in the delirium of reception, the listener's thoughts are replaced by the protagonist's in an identification structure unique to radio. This psycho-narrational aspect of Golden Age radio crosses over into the *noir* productions of the time, in which the interiority of the voice-over, emerging from a wounded or pursued body, "implies linguistic constraint and physical confinement—confinement to the body, to claustral spaces, and to inner narratives" (Silverman 1988:45). This claustral point-of-view, when not subject to the limiting image (as in the noir film) gives the listener no basis for discerning whether what is narrated is the product of his or her own interior delusion. Thus, the paranoia of stolen, surveilled thoughts is compounded by the paranoiac anxiety that the thoughts returned in exchange for the stolen ones are all lies (a repressed fear that is manipulated in Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast [1938]).

Secondly, in a disruption of the coherent, yet generally unhealthy, interiors of Golden Age radio and noir film, radio loads more voices into the head than the body can withstand—the "schizo*phonic*" condition that Whitehead maps. Avantgarde radio exploits the schizophonic, overcrowding the interior space of radio reception with many voices and sounds, disrupting traditional visions of what the tape, music, or the interpretive apparatus behind the ear can withstand. In Whitehead's *Pressures of the Unspeakable* (1992a), the nervous system of Sydney—a city reconfigured as a schizophonic body—is mapped radio-

phonically by the recording of inhabitants' screams on a 24-hour "scream-line" (Whitehead 1992b:115). The interpretation of these various screams—some of which seem to overload the recording equipment—is performed by Whitehead himself as "Dr. Scream." As ironically calm doctor and narrator, his clarity belies that he really has no control in this dispersed nervous topography: "What is certain is that this 'nervous system' is simultaneously that of Sydney *and* of Whitehead *and* of radio circuitry—all of which coalesce into a possible alter-ego for the moments of our most severe nervous tension" (Weiss 1995:83). Whitehead's radio art is based on a "*principia schizophonica*" which Weiss argues is part of the ontological structure of radio: "In radio, not only is the voice separated from the body, and not only does it return to the speaker as a disembodied presence—it is, furthermore, thrust into the public arena to mix its sonic destiny with that of other voices" (1995:79). Because of this paranoid-schizophrenic stereophony, even though radio is omnipresent, the radiophonic eludes psychic as well as institutional organization. To rephrase the evangelical aphorism, *Radio is Love.*

Thus when the radio body has not entirely disappeared, as on the Futurist stage ("a colorless electromechanical architecture, powerfully vitalized by chromatic emanation from a luminous source" [Prampolini (1915) 1986:204-05]), it is presented as a mad body in historical radio art (Futurists, Artaud, Beckett), a body beyond the modes of reason that reason has presented, a body like Cage's prepared pianos in which the "natural" vibrations are deflected by "technological" intrusions, which the Futurists called *excitations.* No longer do nerves excite other nerves in a narcissistic closed circuit. Rather, from the Futurists on, the body's signals are deflected and cybernetically connected up with signals that have more intelligence, freedom, and futurity than common sense language. These signals are sometimes literally digital, as in Giacomo Balla's pieces in which numbers are recited as part of the glossolalia ([1916] 1986:232-33). The body vibrates erotically through contact with out-of-body signals that deconstruct, as Marinetti claims, traditional psychology.[2]

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This body-madness, if survived, promises a transformation through decomposition. Bodies become "exultant, luminous corporalities" (Prampolini [1915] 1986:205) in the dark of radio's theatre. Formerly constrained by provincial intelligence (the source of irritation especially for the Italian Futurists), the body realizes fantastic possibilities. Fortunato Depero's theatre calls for "[d]ecompositions of the figure and the deformation of it, even until its absolute transformation; e.g., a dancing ballerina who continually accelerates, transforming herself into a floral vortex, etc." ([1916] 1986:207). If *stunad* (from *stonato*) is a damning epithet in Italian meaning not only "out-of-tune," but also "a little crazy, a little stupid," the Futurists and other radio artists risk cultural damnation by intentionally voyaging out-of-tune. Perhaps, more accurately, they voyage out-of-form, risking stupidity, or out-of-body, madness, in order to rechannel and repackage sensation, noise, and communication—momentarily spanning a bridge between technological and biological noise, going beyond language to the blissful vibrations of the thing itself.

Since no one concept of "out-of-form" can be correct without instituting another monolithic concept of form, sanity, or reason, the body of radio art work is dispersed and undisciplined, posing difficulties for the historicizing of radio art within sound history; radio is supposedly perceived only in the interior space of the mind, an intimate space incommensurable to historiography. The attempt to organize radiophonic noise on a wide scale—no less the range of concerns of this essay—has always met its challenge in this intensely personal space (akin to the presocial or maternal) where radio is received. From Marinetti's "pure organization of radiophonic sensations" (Zurbrugg 1981:54) to the creation of profits out of ether by cyber-industries and Wall Street financiers, from the Bible's erasure of the Big Bang to Fanon's description of radio backfiring on Algeria's colonizers—one can see how "nationalistic" projects to organize and use radiophonic chaos are always undercut by the crashes, the revolutions, the noise, and the nonsense of a radio-engendered universe. Even though large, state-financed broadcasting has traditionally used radio to construct a national voice, radio art is incommensurable to this project of unification and *whole*-someness. It has thrived in pirate radio, community radio, anti-gallery gallery installations, tape culture, avantgarde film and performance—illuminating the solitude of production and consumption of an unprofitable art which does not attempt to conquer space and time. In fact, contemporary radio art, even more so than the radio and sound art of the '50s and '60s, is engaged in the act of *hysteron proteron*, turning back the technological clock in the face of technological hype, reinjecting the primal into the postmodern, making the future strange by the avantgarde use of an "obsolete" technology.[3]

This dialectic between future and past has always been an aspect of avantgarde art: "[I]t should not be forgotten that both the Modernist and Post-Modern avant-gardes evince a 'zero' phase, in which aspirations to what Gysin terms 'machine poetry' are counterbalanced by 'primitive' alternatives, deriving inspiration from the distant past" (Zurbrugg 1981:54). However, as never before, radio, once the sign of future aspirations, now signifies the past quite efficiently. Even though William Burroughs, cut-up tape artist, has made it into some now infamous Nike ads, and Joe Frank, late-night radio monologist and experimental radio dramatist, hawks Zima—seemingly unifying their vocal personalities with a thousand points of light—these moments are rare, targeting a small audience and by no means heralding the reinvigoration of radio art in U.S. television culture. Radio's "Golden Age"—the only area of interest to the few publicly accessible radio archives in America—is over. However, radio—for its own avantgarde and for outsiders—is the future and the past, coursing through the century, creating and destroying, an immaterial primal matter so unstable and creative as to make apocalypse obsolete and beginnings interminable. Radio is the suppressed double of our visually material universe.

Bridging the Gap

The Proles of the Synapse

> *Radiophonic space defines a nobody synapse between (at least) two nervous systems. Jumping the gap requires a high voltage jolt that permits the electronic release of the voice, allowing each utterance to vibrate with all others, parole in libertà. Or, as fully autonomous radiobodies are shocked out of their skins, they can finally come into their own.*
>
> —*Gregory Whitehead (1991:85)*

A dispersed nervous system, in constant crisis, evident in radio works like *Pressures of the Unspeakable* or Artaud's *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (1947), is the already operative precondition for dissolving the distance between word and thing, theatre and life, facilitating either the revolutionary leap into new perceptual and productive relations or the descent into madness. The synapses firing, "there will be neither respite or vacancy in the spectator's mind or sensibility. That is, between life and the theater there will be no distinct division, but instead a continuity" (Artaud [1938] 1958:126). And this continuity, created in the collapse of the boundary between public representation and private reception, uniting real and illusory, is described by Artaud in ways suggestive of the radiophonic flux beyond the image of "life" reproduced in the traditional, psychological theatre: "Furthermore, when we speak of the word 'life,' it must be understood we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach" ([1938] 1958:13). Artaud's radiophonic experimentation espouses a dark Platonism in which formal representation never reaches the realm from which representation emerges. Most likely this realm is the body, the dark reality to which the radiophonic accedes. The paradoxical antiformalism of radio art nevertheless attempts to reveal this suppressed underside of theatrical representation and of representation in general.

Spanning the gap between signifier and signified, disrupting localized signifiers of madness and displacing them, hurling them free of the body into the electronic and disembodied politic, radiophonic art [...] continues a fantasy dreamt up by the Futurists, the fantasy of *parole in libertà* (words in freedom).

In *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud introduces as a method of spanning the gap between sign and signified a poetics based not in representation, but in the unsettling notion of the Double:

> [T]he theater must also be considered as the Double, not of this direct, everyday reality of which it is gradually being reduced to a mere inert replica—as empty as it is sugar coated—but of another archetypal and dangerous reality, a reality of which principles, like dolphins, once they have shown their heads, hurry to dive back into the obscurity of the deep.
>
> For this reality is not human but inhuman, and man with his customs and his character counts for very little in it. Perhaps even man's head would not be left to him if he were to confide himself to this reality [...]. ([1938] 1958:49)

This reality very much resembles the cybernetic, radiophonic, and fluid universe—a dangerous universe for Artaud, who attempted to counteract the effects of electroshock therapy with his own shocks to the radio system in the scatological and eventually suppressed *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (see Weiss 1992:271). Spanning the gap between signifier and signified, disrupting localized signifiers of madness and displacing them, hurling them free of the body into the electronic and disembodied politic, radiophonic art such as this continues a fantasy dreamt up by the Futurists, the fantasy of *parole in libertà* (words in freedom).

"[W]ords-in-freedom [...] smash the boundaries of literature as they march toward painting, music, noise-art, and *throw a marvelous bridge between the word and the real object*" (Marinetti [1916] 1986:214, italics added). The freedom that the Futurists sought is perhaps the freedom of the word to merge with the real—an impossibility for those who have Lacanian turntables. This bridge has been out, deconstructed, as it were. Only the words in freedom—here represented as proletarians of this futile endeavor (smashing, marching, building)—remain. Bodies, translated into words in freedom and dis*organ*ized, rechanneling libidinal transportation into a new technological reality, smash the traditional boundaries of illusion. This bridge, in Dadaist Tristan Tzara's terms, makes seemingly parallel lines meet by utilizing "the supreme *radiations* of an absolute art" ([1916] 1987:47, italics added) and thereafter making possible "the elegant and unprejudiced leap from one harmony to another sphere; the trajectory of a word, a cry, thrown in the air like an acoustic disc" ([1916] 1987:51). In Artaud, a literal painting of a bridge represents for him another, internal bridge that blurs the concrete and the metaphysical:

> [W]itness for example the bridge as high as an eight-story house standing out against the sea, across which people are filing, one after another, like Ideas in Plato's cave. [... T]heir poetic grandeur, their concrete efficacy upon us, is a result of their being metaphysical; their spiritual profundity is inseparable from the formal and exterior harmony of the picture. ([1938] 1958:36)

Surface harmony and spiritual depth are linked in the moment of a dematerialization that facilitates a dangerous perceptual span between subject and object. The artist's delirium generated out of this perceptual connection is given an elusive but nonarbitrary structure (why eight stories?), momentarily containing the delirium in a concrete image in order to communicate the metaphysical. This bridge, a strangely visual and material image, is perhaps built at the expense of total (and destructive) *jouissance*. The function of its materiality is to present a *new relation*, rather than a non-relation, between signifier and signified. There is, in effect, a politics to delirium.

In his introduction to *Phantasmic Radio*, Allen Weiss introduces the phenomenology of radiophonics, not only as the future of radio, but as an addition to contemporary theoretical paradigms, an addition which rethinks the past and restructures the future in terms of radio. I find his explication of a new bridge between signifier and signified compelling:

> [R]adiophony transforms the very nature of the relation between signifier and signified, and [...] the practice of montage established the key modernist paradigm of consciousness. This task is informed by the *motivated, non-arbitrary* relationships between signifier and signified (S/s), where the mediating term is not the slash that delineates the topography of the unconscious (/), but rather the variegated, fragile, unrepresentable flesh of the lived body. As such, this work participates in the linguistic and epistemological polemic at the center of continental philosophy—between phenomenological, structuralist, and poststructuralist hermeneutics—concerning the ontological status of body, voice, expression, and phantasms. [...] Between voice and wavelength, between body and electricity, the future of radio resounds. (1995:7–8)

This shift from *the unconscious* as the mediating term to *the body* is all important, although quite difficult to conceive.[4] In Lacan's scenario, what is

signifiable submits to *extracorporeal* relations (the unconscious) in order to produce a signifier. These out-of-body relations determine the "it" that speaks through the subject, and thus we are always dealing with the Other when the "I" speaks. This problematic of language is the basis of the idea that pain cannot be communicated, since bodily sensation is radically subjective: the state of the body cannot be spoken through language without a misrepresentation or misrecognition. However if, as in radio, one considers the extracorporeal not as a superstructural presence but as *the very material of radiophonic corporealities*, then we have an entirely new paradigm to consider.

While in Lacan's scenario we are radios which speak the transmissions of an elusive source, in this "newer" radiophonic scenario, the body is source, substance, and medium of radio. Not only is the whole body considered receptive to the whole gamut of signals and vibrations of the radiophonic universe, but the body also has an ability to transmit and record. The radio theatre is not just a place for the play of the disembodied image or imagination, covering up radio's perceived lack.

> While it has become a commonplace to talk about sound as the medium of the imagination (a gray area), the ear also opens a path for acoustic vibrations to travel through the spine and skeleton. Sound, then, is actually *a material for the whole body conducted through nerves and bones by way of a hole in the head.* (Whitehead 1991:85)

Here the lack, or the hole, speaks—the whole body is channeled through a hole in the head and through radio. Therefore, radio is not a medium discrete from the body. The radio artist is both producer and consumer, audience and performer, of his own electroacoustical soundings. It must be remembered that the structuring of everyday noises, including bodily sounds, as "music" (a Futurist practice reinaugurated by Cage) was in its time a controversial addition to the sensorium of reproduced sound. Furthermore, like the body artist (many of whom, including Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Terry Fox, engaged in sound art), the radio artist, by introducing the body, dematerializes the art object into the performing presence. Like body art, sound art, when it utilizes the clicks, the hums, and other extralinguistic bodily manifestations of the voice as its material, is transmitting, as if from the living to the dead, a "new *aesthetics of existence*, [...] seeking to suppress the aesthetic illusion, exceeding traditional aesthetic bounds and classifications in terms of dancing, theatre, or films, once again drawing closer to that heterogeneous totality of experience that we know from everyday life" (Gorsen 1984:141). The body is thus an integral part of the transmission/reception complex of radio art, even though common images of radio airwaves present an ethereal realm where signals play separately from the grounded body. For Whitehead, the ear is the bridge between the ethereal and the bodily, expanding the domain of radio's electronic play and transforming the body into a player. William Burroughs, performing a monolog as Mr. Martin, a U.S. citizen who has been sent up into space and who, upon his return, is mistaken for an outer space alien because of his new found disdain for humanity, remarks, "Human activity is drearily predictable. It should now be obvious that what you considered a reality is the result of precisely predictable because pre-recorded human activity. Now, what can louse up a prerecorded biological recording?" (n.d.). Burroughs' cut-up method, like Whitehead's, redirects the flow of information by cutting into the recorded transmissions of the mass media with biological recordings. We hear his body, and his full-bodied voice, then, through the disembodied signals of the mass media. He deforms the consumption and reproduction of dead forms that compose "live" radio. Burroughs performs an

antireproduction based on internally motivated chance operations (almost surgical—cuts without anesthesia) rather than external form. The body becomes a *radio system* (in the chaos theory sense of system) rather than a *radio set*. It is transmitter, receiver, and director in one.

The lines between production and consumption are broken down in this system, and a circuitry is set up so that what were once separate spheres continually modify each other. The real of radio is released, and pleasure is rechanneled as the body becomes part of a "bachelor machine," as in the anti-Oedipal scenario. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari break down the stage of traditional psychoanalysis in a radiophonic manner, opposing their circuitry to a massified, standardizing discipline. They describe the underside of the productive universe with a metaphor of constant recording:

> For the real truth of the matter—the glaring, sober truth that resides in delirium—is that there is no such thing as relatively independent spheres or circuits [read: independent bodies, technologies]: production is immediately consumption and a recording process (*enregistrement*), without any sort of mediation, and the recording process and consumption directly determine production, though they do so within the production process itself. ([1977] 1983:4)

Even non-radio artists have taken up the metaphor of body as both performer and that entity which is sounded against (audience). The body, resonating between "I" and "Other," transmits its resonations in order to liberate the body from its western Instruction Manual, but only at the risk of a "raving consciousness" (Kozloff 1975:32). (For whom is this consciousness raving? Where does the burden of this perception and interpretation lie?) For example:

> Joseph Beuys, lying face down for three hours in a Naples gallery, rubbed his oil-smeared hand over copper slabs until, as a writer has described it, "his body vibrated loaded with energy like a body charged with electric current." The most recurrent sentence is: "I am a transmitter. I emit." (Kozloff 1975:33)

This reorganization of the body not only as receiver and producer, but also as transmitter, carrier, and ultimately disrupter, highlights the "sober truth" in delirium rather than the pathology of delirium. Without the topology of the extracorporeal Other, which Artaud disdains, it is impossible to record, reproduce, and recognize the signs of psychosis except as a total condition—the truth of the body electric. Without the "it" speaking through man, "it is impossible even to register the structure of a symptom in the analytic sense of the term" (Lacan [1958] 1982:79). Notice Lacan's use of the word "register," which can imply the act of recording a tape. Artaud then, in his disdain, seems to be disrupting psychiatric symptomatology in his theory and radio work by disrupting the dictates of faithful recording. He attempts a return to the what-has-been in a "magic identification" ([1938] 1958:67) with an unrecorded past of communal wholeness. In the act of suspending our modern disbelief in the communal possibility of a dispersed stage, he displaces diagnosis onto the body politic, further reducing the identificatory structures of both the everyday and the psychoanalytic to noise: "WE KNOW IT IS WE WHO WERE SPEAKING" ([1938] 1958:67). Everybody risks psychosis, and the only way French radio could quash a postwar psychotic crisis was to contain the broadcast on the tape, deadening it in a magnetic crypt and not allowing its supernatural qualities to awaken the dead of the airwaves. Pathologizing the tape itself, and suppressing the necromancy of the text, French radio answers the unsettling

question "Is it live, or is it Memorex?" by siding with the tape, in the hopes that the unwholesome utterances will not surpass the tape's dead materiality. Artaud's answer to the question "Is it live, or is it mimesis?" might choose both, aware of the unsettling nature of the Double. Symptoms are a mimetic illusion that contains the living structure of a sickness as if on tape. The act of registration and the ideologies of tape repress the psychotic underside of post-war radio culture—a reality of fragmentation, shell shock, and exploded identities. The diagnosis is always another dead repetition, the living sickness beyond the reach of the speaking cure; the spoken, the enunciation of "it," masks the truth of a total delirium and derangement experienced everyday by vibrating bodies.

For Brecht, the revelation of the vibration between bodies—animal desires in the dark which conquer even the thick-skinned—is part of his interactive Marxist concept of theatre. Not only does he delineate the barriers between alienated characters in the hopes of vibrating them out of those barriers, but he also foregrounds the edges of theatrical illusion, the better to dissolve them as well—uniting audience and stage, and creating new relations. His dream of radio is one in which the audience both receives and transmits, bringing something new to every performance. Perhaps Brecht, more materialist than alchemist, has ambiguous feelings concerning the actual effectivity of a bridge between word and thing constructed outside the lights of theatre. I sense this hesitancy to embrace the Platonic cave of radio in a comment on actual reproduction, spoken by Garga of *In The Jungle of Cities*:

> Love, the warmth of bodies in contact, is the only mercy shown us in the darkness. But the only union is that of the organs, and it can't bridge over the cleavage made by speech. Yet they unite in order to produce beings to stand by them in their hopeless isolation. And the generations look coldly into each other's eyes. ([1927] 1971:157)

Perhaps the bridge between the spoken and the real that sound constructs is only done by a ruse "in the dark." Perhaps the utopian or dystopian radiophonic universe, if experienced, is only a momentary gratification, and will lose its transcendent power in the cold light of vision, an inevitable event in our psychic economy. The next section will deal almost exclusively with the shorter works of Beckett—works which, as will become evident toward the end of my argument, highlight the unavoidable dialectic between hearing and vision, even in works that are limited to the sonic realm. I will deal initially with the aspects of Beckett's drama that most successfully point to a buzz and hum behind the Word, a seething subsensory substance, and I will then consider how the economy of vision torments this substance into appearance.

Molecular Orality and the Vision of It

> *The original speech act begins to disintegrate as soon as it comes to grips with its schizophonic double.*
>
> —*Gregory Whitehead (1990:60)*

> *Do you find anything ... bizarre about my way of speaking? (pause.) I do not mean the voice. (pause.) No, I mean the words. (pause. More to herself.) I use none but the simplest words, I hope, and yet I sometimes find my way of speaking very ... bizarre. (pause.)*
>
> —*Samuel Beckett,* All That Fall *([1957] 1984:13)*

Beckett's plays are uniquely oral plays; if they do not explicitly engage with the radiophonic (for example *All That Fall*, *Embers* [1959], *Cascando* [1964]), they limit the multimedia possibilities of the traditional stage in order to direct the visual and aural attention of the audience to something like the radiophonic. Plays such as *Play* (1964), *Not I* (1973), and *That Time* (1976) make their protagonist the voice and their antagonist the body—paralyzed by age, pain, memory, or surrealistically incarcerated by such devices as the urns of *Play*. One of the voices in *That Time*, a play with many voices trapped in a single head, says, "no notion who it was saying what you were saying whose skull you were clapped up in whose moan" (1984:231). Radio's clichéd but celebrated "theatre of the mind" is transformed into a nightmare space of schizophrenia and melancholy, where one's most intimate thoughts can become alien entities when performed. Each speech act illuminates the drama of the cranial cavity's invasion by sense, an invasion which, as I have noted earlier, is the hallmark of the radiophonic.

The simplest words become bizarre when free of the body, stripped of the illusion of the voice and sense, free to buzz in the radio airwaves with the flies.

One can say, *in light of* these oral dynamics, that Beckett's seemingly "shorter plays" are in actuality infinite plays, composed of hundreds of acts—speech acts—each with an infinite potential for interpretation. In contrast to traditional acts that mechanically push one another in fits and starts to the bitter end, Beckett's speech acts "act" as molecules do. The theatrical elements in Beckett's plays (for example, stage and body) are antagonized by their own brute materiality, seemingly doing nothing and going nowhere; however, these elements seethe with multiple acts of speech, a molecular orality. *Not I* stages the molecular orality of *decomposition*:

> so on ... so on it reasoned ... vain questionings ... and all dead still ... sweet silent as the grave ... when suddenly ... gradually ... she realiz-- ... what? ... the buzzing? ... yes ... all dead still but for the buzzing ... when suddenly she realized ... words were-- ... what? ... who? ... no! ... she! ... (*Pause and movement 2.*) ... realized ... words were coming ... imagine! ... words were coming ... (1984:218–19)

Words and flies buzz around the dead body. Vain questioning about the mystery of death hovers self-servingly over the corpse like the flies. All "nonperforming" bodies in Beckett, in their crepuscular or pathological, hypersedentary sentience, perform only molecularly and sonically, transmitting and receiving while fragmenting and decomposing, in the throes of radiation. Mrs. Rooney, in Beckett's most conventional radio drama, *All That Fall*, wails "Oh to be in atoms!"—expressing a desire not only for death, but to be composed of small fragments free of the body and the sense of language. She perhaps wishes to transform her mythically huge and unmanageable body into a radio body. The simplest words become bizarre when free of the body, stripped of the illusion of the voice and sense, free to buzz in the radio airwaves with the flies. Mrs. Rooney's parodied desire for catholic transcendence of the human flesh generates a radio hallucination in which language breaks down into atomic particles.

For Beckett, then, the traditional fantasy of oral culture or radio culture[5] is perhaps an impossible dream of wholeness in a *particular* world. Rather than conjuring the song of a community (even though many of his radio works were famous for their productions on BBC—font of the British communal voice), his multiple-act plays and playlets present the utterly and irrevocably fragmented nature of speech. Spoken words cannot produce a cure for pain, even though some of his lines sound like parodies of any aspirin commercial: "all that pain as if ... never been" (1984:152). Many people have talked about radio's ability to form a coherent sound-image of the nation/everyman as a palliative for the ills of the body politic. This analgesic radio voice gives identity, direction, and coherence to the nation. In Beckett's plays, however, the (everyman) voice that is the inspiration for traditional fantasies of oral and commercial culture (and their combination in the advert: "Personally I always preferred Lipton's" [1984:154]) is replaced by a highly internalized, schizophonic voice in the head.

The voice in the head in Beckett sometimes lacks coherence to such an extent that it loses its moorings in the very head from which it originates. Does the voice belong to the head it inhabits, or is radio's "national" voice a colonizing one? In *That Time*, the multiple voices are incarcerated in a body that has somehow become alien to itself. "Could you ever say I to yourself in your life" (1984:230). There, in a *nut*, incidentally, is the postcolonial problematic: "no notion who it was saying what you were saying whose skull you were clapped up in whose moan" (1984:231). Question marks pleasantly disappear in these litanies, which are not meant to be spoken, yet are. Agrammatic thought, externalized, inexorably continues:

> not a thought in your head till hard to believe harder and harder to believe you ever told anyone you loved them or anyone you till just one of those things you kept making up to keep the void out just another of those old tales to keep the void from pouring in on top of you the shroud. (1984:230)

These plays have been called "skull-scapes": they dramatize the headache of having to constantly think ourselves, where each thought becomes an act or performance to keep out the radioactive void, even when acting, moving, or living is the least desired thing. By what mechanism is this internal thought brought to the surface in Beckett's plays? When we act alone, in our head, it is indeed an absurd drama, and not at all like the coherent, internal monologs of Golden Age and noir radio. And Beckett is maybe highlighting the sadistic nature of radio's intrusion that brings these absurdities to the surface, making the skull an unsafe place for the internal workings of the mind and imagination. "I can do nothing ... for anybody ... any more ... than God. So it must be something I have to say. How the mind works still!" says W1 of *Play* (1984:153), whom I characterize as playing a character, an everyman, only under duress. What is important is that this "radio nobody" is forced to be somebody *in the light of vision*. What "she" says can only be conceived as a masquerade of her internal thoughts, exemplifying the Artaudian belief that "the most commanding interpenetrations join sight to sound" ([1938] 1958:55). Encased in an urn, speech is her only possible action as actor, if she actually wishes to act. But she keeps on saying "Get off me! Get off me!"—ostensibly referring to the lights of the play, which elicit speech in *Play*, interrogatively, silently. The lights compel her to engage in the speech act, externalizing the internal, placing a gross beam on a dreamer whose inner lights, although dreamt, have already been extinguished, as in this Expressionist cry (here, from Kokoschka's *Sphinx and Strawman*) that claims that the stars of the soul pass only as Berkeley's tree falls:

> If I could only respond out of my loneliness to your secret confessions, oh, to be able to place a rainbow of reconciliation over shocked sexes, *(becoming hysterical)* my feelings are like so many falling stars, stars falling into the narrow fields of my soul to be extinguished—but the Word which reaches out far beyond me like a huge gesture means nothing to you. ([1907] 1986:33)

As W1 is compelled to make these speech gestures full of nothingness, the wholeness of her internal imagined self is fragmented into a multiplicity of acts which do not combine to tell any one truth, until the silence of death. The wholeness that the light presents is false (a discrete image), and the light also elicits sonic falseness, the lie of this externalization of the internal by speech. W1: "Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that some day, somehow, I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?" (Beckett 1984:153).

So, with the lights and language of the stage intersecting on these incarcerating urns, do we believe the "truth beauty, beauty truth" aphorism of the Grecian Urn poem, an aphorism which connects truth to vision? Or is truth beyond vision, in the molecular fragmentation that can be perceived behind the *trompe l'oeil* surfaces of abstract speech? In Beckett's *Film* it is noted that, "the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit" ([1965]1984:163). Even though this description might not include *Film* as a "radiophonic play"—it seems to be more about vision, Beckett's oral plays link the interpretative valuation of speech acts to the valuation of the object by the eye. Thus, in *Play*, while the register of action takes place entirely within speech, the speech is determined by the duration and locus of the light. "Being seen" (1984:157) becomes the same as being heard. Because of this dynamic, it may not be useful to distinguish vision and sound in Beckett (at least in *Play)*, since, in a quantum world, both are products of particulate wave radiations. Arguably the perceptual apparatus of theatre, cinema, and television disciplines the traditional audience more to see than to hear, constructing differing levels of acculturated *perceivedness*; Beckett's plays, however, transform this discipline, and one cannot help hearing. But in all, despite the distinct and disciplined and sometimes deformed registers, the "agony [of the protagonist is] of perceivedness" (1984:165), and the drama on Beckett's stage is a Houdini-like attempt to escape from the perceptual apparatus of the audience even while incontrovertibly *there*. Perhaps, then, we can replace the register of "vision" with "the perceived," and we will include sound on a different track of the same register rather than confuse sound, in a utopian leap, with that substance which falls out of relational structures of phenomenology. In the end, this utopian "substance" forms the metaphysical substance of the truth behind "shocked sexes," although we are left *speculating* as to whether it exists as the guiding force of the play. Is there anything in excess of perceivedness, in excess of the unreal structure of external values that creates the reality of the subject? If there is, all performative structures are in constant crisis, holding off the eruption of this subsensory matter. Beckett's plays—often called children of the nuclear age and, by association, our Emergency Broadcast Systems—manage these crises of immaterial power.

Play is a play about shocked sexes and the range of mastery—of this force behind appearances—that each character can manage. In general, different illusions of mastery of this force are available for different sexes, and this is the source of tension in *Play*. To what extent is the play "play" for each of the characters? M has enough mastery to call the past "just play": "I know now, all that was just ... play. And all this? When will all this--" (153). In the economy of perception, can we call M male and the W characters female? It would be interesting to see the choices directors make in this instance. Not-

withstanding, W1 lacks the sort of mastery that M seems to exhibit. The lights force W1 to engage in "just ... play" (1984:153) without advantage; the lights make torture for a soul that wishes to be quiet and to die. She feels merely played with rather than playing (157). The subject of *Play* is the manipulation of the play and here the manipulator is phallic. In *Play* the W characters are asked to compare happy memories (ostensibly regarding M) (154), so that, like the phallus, M is the standard for comparison and measurement, ratiocinating, the bar between two numbers in a fraction of desire. This mathematical relationality, coupled with the breakdown of discrete appearances onstage that the radiophonic aspects of this play enhance, points to the unperceived molecular substratum behind the realized hallucination of sex. At the same time, however, the lights peremptorily regiment reality as if in battle with this fragmentary and metaphysical substance. "Am I as much as ... being seen?" (157). M(an) can only be measured by his "being seen" not only as a stage actor, but by the two W(omen) in a sexual relation. He is both metaphorically and literally the dick, since his horror of the spiritual and Platonic implies that his relationships with those W(ithout) the dick were purely sexual. Even though sexual in nature, the play constantly bowdlerizes the explicitly sexual, since everything is limited to the seen, which in turn is regimented by the lighting. Even if the character that seems the most sexually comfortable in *Play*, W2, seems to experience the excess of *jouissance* in her "*peal of wild low laughter*" (1984:157), this excess is cut off, measured by the time of the lights, turned into another value that the "mere eye" can discern. The "sense" that "being seen" creates is the source of all value in the theatre. And still, for Beckett, mere eye is not enough.

This repressed double of the broadcast system, only returning with a vengeance in the threat of total destruction by catastrophic weather or the nuclear bomb, is contained in a test, only a test, a recorded tone of fixed duration.

"Being seen" as the phallus is not the same as "being" or "having" the phallus. In Lacan and Freud, the distinction is made between the little boy, whose role is to *be* the phallus for the mother who, in an only deceptively coherent economy, desires to *have* the phallus. The subject's reality is created only through this unreal relation, the unreality of which is heightened by Beckett. Into this relationship, "appearance" (or masquerade) intervenes as a substitute for "having," and to mask the lack in "being." The ontology of the theatre has always been illusory—that is, it has always been about appearance (a word, by the way, with an inner "ear") and masquerade. It is never being or having which is played out, but appearing. And there is a sense that having and being are *never* played out, because it is only appearance that can extend out of the body as the body's mediating material; thus the theatrical metaphor has extended throughout even the most everyday activities. Yet the ontology of radio, as Herbert Blau has mentioned in conversation, is about the *shadow* of appearance—and "the Shadow knows." Whether radio is outside the theatre of the phallus, or whether, when we listen to radio, we merely "prick our ears" to the harmonic resonations of sex that prompt the phallus to the stage, is uncertain. Beckett's plays *of* uncertainty contain both theatrical and radiophonic ontologies and allow them to interpenetrate at the molecular and cultural levels of existence. Beckett's theatre of appearance stages disappearance even in the light of

vision. And this disappearance is what Lacan calls *aphanasis*, or a fading, at the molecular level of language. For example, in *Play*, the equation between "being seen" and speaking (a paradoxical equation of the passive to the active) equates appearance with disappearance, vision's ruse with the lack that propels language into action. This radio-theatrical drama of Beckett dramatizes the speaking subject and compounds this drama dialectically with the economy of vision.

In the final fade-out, what the body is, what we hear in Barthes's "grain of the voice," is the not-body, the decomposition of the body. We were never "composed" except in some Platonic dream of hi-fi recording, or in the fantasy of digital remastering. Was there ever a mastering to begin with? What are we *masking* in the tape, except some backwards melody bringing us back to the source of all life—death? The radiophonic system—tape and razor, mike and mixer, transmitter and receiver—must always have an Emergency Broadcast System. This repressed double of the broadcast system, only returning with a vengeance in the threat of total destruction by catastrophic weather or the nuclear bomb, is contained in a test, only a test, a recorded tone of fixed duration. The composition of this tone is unsettling, and its repetition a denial of the constant reality of radiation and weathering which takes the body away, quanta by quanta, even as one hears the false subjunctive of "if this were an actual emergency." In a way, to "picture" this quantum reality of the body, one receives an image that resembles the image of consciousness, but also an image of war. Free of the body and emergency, both consciousness and words in freedom—which remain when the body and its voice are gone—give the taste of constant death. The voice, however, though constantly "signing-off" (the broadcast version of the swan song) and longing to merge with its metaphysical allies, articulates living presence on dead air. "Just one great squawk and then ... peace" (Beckett 1984:19).

Notes

1. Kathleen Woodward, in her analysis of the work of Cage, sees a fault in his uncritical embrace of "the electrical sublime," an idea which has been around since the 19th century and has only served to support the monopolies of the power and light companies (1980:189).
2. Whether these out-of-body signals are spiritual in nature was a source of contention for the Futurists. Radio's dangerous ability to vibrate the subject out of its borders is sometimes recognized as a spiritual quality of the radio. Futurists who were closer to Symbolism (like Balla) claimed that any dissolution of materiality, even if facilitated by technology, had to be spiritual in nature (Tuchman 1986:40). Later in his career, Marinetti repudiated Symbolism, constructing a more secular version of vibration, perhaps inspired by the very earthly vibrations of shell shock. Marinetti's version seems to have won out, if only because of the commodification and sexualization of vibration, repressing (or perhaps heightening) the transcendent qualities of exultant vibrations as they are incorporated in "Magic Fingers" beds and hand-held massagers. It is either Marinetti's dream or nightmare that late-night TV presents to our pre-REM retinas images of bikini-clad all-American girls shooting machine guns in slo-motion.
3. Perhaps the most well-known radio work that is popular for its use of the techniques of radio drama outside of their temporal context is Tom Lopez's *The Fourth Tower of Inverness* (1972), in which radio drama chestnuts are combined with the quirky mystico-political vibe of the early '70s. This shattered temporal soundscape is typified by the serial's magical "Lotus Jukebox," which determines the fate of the characters as it plays both '50s rock-and-roll and Zen koans.
4. In earlier formations of contemporary radiophonic art, the supple topographies of the body are elided with those of the unconscious, as when Gregory Whitehead, in a 1989 article, remarks, "writing radio puts into relief the supple contours of the human unconscious" (1989:11).

5. Whitehead describes this fantasy well:

> Every now and again, the quaint idea of radio as a kind of Talking Drum for the Global Village comes around for one more spin. In this romantic scenario, radio art is cast as an electronic echo of oral culture, harkening back to ancient storytellers spinning yarns in front of village fires. The idea has a seductive ring to it [... yet *m]ost* forgotten are the lethal wires that still heat up from inside out, wires that connect radio with warfare, brain damage, rattles from the necropolis. When I turn my radio on, I hear a whole chorus of death rattles [...]. (1991:88–9)

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