

TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS AND PEREGRINATIONS OF THE RADIO DOCUMENTARY IMAGINATION

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INTRODUCTION

Ample evidence attests to the emergence of a ‘documentary project’ in radio by the 1930s, located in multiple sites of creation, many of which developed concurrently, or in dialogue, with the documentary movement in cinema gathering momentum in these same years. Across diverse sites practitioners built bodies of work, some influencing other authors through their ideas, approach or sensibility towards the subjects they chose to explore and reveal. As in the world of film making, a small number of key individuals – auteurs – and centres of production – workshops, studios – helped shape the wider field and offered a vision, as well as encouraging considerable institutional support. Becoming aware of experiments in documentary in cinema, these new radio ‘producers’ also developed techniques to explore all kinds of subject matter in an array of new forms. They took their microphones and new recording apparatus ‘en plein air’, gathering the ‘acoustic expression of life’ to compose a whole new auditory field for documentary creation. More than the “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson and Hardy 1946: 11), this also included work close to the radio drama. As with cinema, this expansion of the documentary in radio and sound evolved in relation to other arts and literature, and with the rise of another new field: broadcast journalism and reportage. We can encounter a host of new terms employed in the first decades of radio which refer to this emerging international field for documentary; some of these terms also announced a new art form which drew on radio’s own distinctive qualities. Here we encounter the ‘sound picture’, ‘actuality’, ‘acoustic film’, ‘radio-film’ and ‘feature’ – with terminology in German and Danish (‘Hörfolge’, ‘Hørebilleder’, ‘Hörfilme’), mirroring some of these terms; in French the ‘suite radiophonique’, ‘mosaïque’, and ‘film radio-phonique’ reveals these influences and echoes other media art forms.

In this chapter I aim to register transnational interactions of ideas, specific programs, departments and producers between key centres of production and individuals. I will also reflect on the role and impact of public service broadcasting (PSB) to this story, identifying distinct traditions and movements of work which crossed national boundaries. The output associated with BBC ‘features’ and the departments which encouraged this broad experimental field to develop, eg the BBC Features Department (1945-1965), perhaps had the largest impact as ideas, models and practices spread internationally from the pioneering period (1928-) up until the end of radio’s so called ‘golden age’. Features, “often treated as a kind of broadcasting laboratory” involving the mixing of “drama and current affairs” (Crisell 2002: 41) expanded and gained prestige at the BBC during World War 2 and in the decade after, particularly as BBC International and ‘transcription services’ directed their content globally, disseminating programs in multiple languages, or following BBC’s substantial post war involvement in establishing new or revitalised public broadcasting services in the Axis countries, especially Germany. There is a direct line of development from BBC ‘features’ to the Radio-Feature tradition adopted and promoted in Germany from 1947, and this field remains strong today.

The German feature culture supported by ARD stations also contributed to the international expansion and ecology of audio documentary forms from the late 1960s onwards. Key individuals pursued innovation and created new networks connecting radio producers across regions, languages, systems and nations. This opened opportunities for increased distribution, collaboration and adaptation of documentary-inspired work. The International Features Conference (IFC, launched in Berlin in 1975 through Sender Freies Berlin/SFB) promoted auteur documentary creation across borders, renewed critical understanding of forms, sophistication of practice and the excitement which comes with a range of projects nourished by new and re-energised production centres. By the mid to late 1970s a radiophonic new wave akin to that of *cinéma vérité* was underway (Madsen 2013). The legacy of these truly transnational developments continues to inform the ‘documentary imagination’ in radio and audio. From broadcast to podcast, new forms emerge yet draw on these traditions and roots. As these new ‘features’ become more audible *and visible*, audiences – the likes of which we have not experienced since radio’s first golden age – encounter this porthole onto reality-fiction energized by an expanding auditory imagination.

EARLY SONIC PROJECTIONS AND RESEARCH SITES: 'RADIO EYE' TO 'HEAR PICTURE'

From Dziga Vertov's early actuality¹ audio and film experiments in Russia, we might also chart the contours of a new radio documentary imagination as it was being born in the early part of last century. To use Vertov's own term, this might be expressed as the birth and evolution of a revolutionary 'radio eye'² which could deliver 'the real' to audiences through startling new montaged compositions of documentary images and sounds: "life taken unawares" (Vertov in Zielinski 1999: 121-122). Recorded sounds of life here would no longer be mere entertaining 'affect' (as with earlier film 'actualities'), but provoke and counter popular performed, scripted films.

A 'radio eye' might also be an apt term to describe the new concepts of 'sound pictures' or 'listening/hear pictures' (translations of the German 'Hörbilder'), which could be communicated from reality via broadcasting, in addition to film. While Vertov's pioneering usage of actuality (eg *Man with a Movie Camera*) occurred before the technological inventions that would allow the new radio broadcasting to open a porthole onto sounding actuality to capture life "sur le vif" (Lumières in Barnouw 1974: 6), this idea we now call 'documentary' was already being proposed through these exploratory interventions in the avant-garde film and sound work he created. As Nichols reminds those who would turn to John Grierson as the founding father of documentary: "Vertov had been making work that would later be labeled documentary for nearly a decade before Grierson" (Nichols 2001: 604). Denis Kaufman aka Vertov also commenced 'kino-pravda' (cine-truth) first in terms of an investigation of hearing, with attempts to transcribe/montage actuality sounds (Zielinski 1999: 122). Although these student experiments in his 'Laboratory of Hearing' (1916) were premature technologically speaking, their failure the reason he turned to film, by the 1930s they could be understood to be re-entering the possible through radio broadcasting, new experiments in 'acoustic film', and through his own breakthrough sound film, *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (1930): the first ever feature film to use extensive audio-actuality (Smirnov 2013). The

1 | "In a radio context, the term 'actuality' can refer to mediated simultaneity – 'liveness' – but also to mass culture, current affairs and fashion, as well as, more vaguely, to abstract ideas of contemporaneity...[or] the phenomena of presence [through sound] which were among radio's main innovations in media-aesthetic and experiential terms." This description relates to the Weimar period "when actuality became a key term" but remains apt beyond this. (Edgar Hanrahan 2009: 16)

2 | Vertov's term 'radio eye' referred to the Russian filmmaker's aim to project his new 'reality' cinema and make this a new documentary art form radiating like radio (but in image and sound) to the international community of workers now able to participate and understand their shared role and experience in revolution.

idea for a documentary ‘radio-eye’ and ‘kino-ear’ (Vertov) now radiated outwards in two mediums.³

And as radio gathered momentum and audiences around the world between the wars, we witness the impacts of ‘writer-directors’ entering broadcasting as well as the cinema. They came to radio from a range of fields not unlike their cinema counterparts – writers, actors, recent graduates in the ‘beaux arts’ or technical sciences, or from ‘theatres’ where the memory of war could not be expunged from mind or body. As David Hendy argues, a ‘sonic consciousness’ was part of this culture-in-the-making, especially at the BBC. This was a culture, Hendy observed, that revealed a high sensitivity to the disorder, cacophony and simultaneity that came with modern warfare and rapidly industrializing cities – the city as utopian and dystopian site for the modern imagination in war’s aftermath. Hendy suggests this sensitivity also helped form the emotional and ideas climate of the early BBC (Hendy 2014, 2013). Drawing on this approach further, we see the first formulations of a documentary imaginary and ‘project’ in BBC radio revealing both the interest in, and the influence of, international avant-gardes and their challenges to perception, order and constructions of the real carried forward in reaction to the old world; but also, and often submerged in the focus on these kinds of formalist or constructivist revolutionary utopias. Within the ‘microclimate’ for BBC’s new producer-researchers, programs might be salve or balm, not so much critique-dialectic (as with Vertov): one solution to modernity’s dissolution. Mathew Arnold’s ‘sweetness and light’ mixes here with kaleidophonic modernism, a surprising strand of the early Reithian BBC, particularly in producers’ experiments in ‘actualities’ and documentary. Examples include Sieveking’s *Kaleidoscope 1* and *2* (2LO September 1928; May 1929), made using ‘multi-studio techniques’ mixing performances (voices, music and effects) paralleling film montage; and A E Harding and John Watt’s 1931 *Crisis in Spain*, a collage of voiced news from radio and print focused on the Spanish civil war, offering ‘impressions’ designed to take the listener into the actuality and experiences reported upon. New ‘internationalisms’ and interdisciplinary utopias and dreams intermix with documentary experiment, formalist art, political idealisms and propaganda of left and right in this period, often to strange ‘affect’. Take the production of *Job To Be Done* (BBC 1939) by Pare Lorentz well known for his radical film documentaries. Originally made

3 | In *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas* (1930-31), “[t]he sounds of machines [...] identification signals of radio-stations...noises of electric power stations” are to be received beyond language: “endlessly various” Vertov explained, “we are still not used to distinguishing among them.” But “[i]ndustrial laborers read these sounds easily, like meaningful signs.” (Vertov in Russian State Museum of Literature and Art, see Mackay 2005). This radio eye then delivers a sound symphony of noises to speak across the language/nation divide to workers who now understand themselves as “a worldwide social-perceptual community...a global majority” [Mackay 2005: 6]).

by the Columbia Workshop (1938), this kaleidophonic 'radio picture' described by Radio Times as a 'radio sensation' purportedly caused Henry Ford to cancel his advertising with CBS.⁴

In the interwar years, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB), initially a British idea as much as a model, became transnational as it was adopted/adapted in the various 'dominions' of Britain's Empire. These years also spawned terrifying racist and militaristic nationalisms and totalitarianisms leading back to chaos, the annihilation of peoples, landscapes...and the almost total collapse of these modernists' and internationalists' first audio-visionary experiments. At the BBC, experiment and 'research' drawing on documentary forms emerged in the context of this inauguration and propulsion of the new 'service' ideal embodied in the Reithian project, and evolved into something other. This ethos drove the modern institution of communication, enlightenment and entertainment or Reith's triad to inform, educate and entertain, providing a suitable medium for an expanded, less doctrinaire documentary idea to take root and multiply. The impulse of bringing the nation together is one aspect of broadcasters like the BBC; but much historical scholarship ignores or misunderstands other impacts and products of national and transnational modernism at play here.

THE BIRTH OF A NEW 'FEATURE' TRADITION IN RADIO

Documentary forms found fertile ground in many places. From the 'radio-eye' and 'kino-ear' bequeathed by Vertov, to similarly experimental creative environments establishing in early Soviet and German radio and film, the project radiated outwards to become entangled in a wider idea of the need for, and value of, 'reality forms'. One of these forms developed by broadcasting organizations and pioneered in film were 'actualities'. These emerged in radio through the innovation of 'outside broadcasting' (OB): firstly, of significant public or sporting events. Adapting and innovating with techniques employed in sports and public events OBs (using live commentaries) a range of related forms appeared in the schedules from the late 1920s: audio 'impressions', 'posters in sound', 'mosaics', 'sound-pictures', 'the panorama'. In the BBC, a small group of producers soon realized the mobile microphone could be a channel connecting listeners to worlds, individuals and communities far beyond their own in distance, but perhaps near in other ways. An auditory 'window' opened, capturing and mixing interior life (the private) with more public rituals of 'the people', or peoples

4 | Bernard Hermann who later worked with Hitchcock, collaborated on effects and music, even as Lorentz created many effects like hammers and other tools conjuring factory assembly lines. This was a rousing panorama and call to overcome unemployment in industrial America and was also broadcast by CBC.

understood by or beyond region/nation. This had not occurred before. Arrived at by these new ‘features’ producers almost accidentally (Scannell 1981, 1986; Shapley and Hart 1996), but a possibility perhaps uniquely suggested by PSB, BBC Manchester’s Olive Shapley, Joan Littlewood, Geoffrey Bridson took their new ‘life sensitive’ microphones into homes, mines, noisy streets and market-places, or lonely rural outposts where life continued as it had done for generations (cf. Madsen 2017). Sound scenes could be relayed, built and ‘composed’, with voices never heard by the mass audience now resonating in an expanded public sphere (paradoxically also in an intimate and individuated way). One world entered another, interpenetrating through the documentary ‘impression’. Life was freed from its entrapment in space and time. While audiences listening transformed into a new mass (of receivers), those channeled through transmission now had the chance to speak beyond the private or the local, and even to meet one another. In 1939 Shapley (1996: 53) took a Craghead woman to a comparable French mining village; the feature she made brought the lives of two towns and women together extending their experience to listeners beyond the national and the local.⁵ BBC ‘actualities’ had transformed from the earlier live ‘sound pictures’⁶ and ‘featured programmes’⁷ to become something else, offering a new ‘imaginary’ where the travelling microphone is conduit and aperture, and “‘ordinary’ worlds [are] made unordinary” (Goldie 1938).

Drawing in new adherents and would-be-artisans of the microphone who were experimenting with studios, sound effects, new ways of writing for the ear as well as presenting live and recorded ‘actualities’ ‘en plein air’, we see the forms of this hybrid program field expanding in a range of locations in Britain, Denmark and Germany. With Walter Ruttmann’s short ‘acoustic film’ or ‘Hörfilm’, *Weekend* – made in association with the Berliner Funkstunde (trans. Berlin Radio Hour) and the radio pioneer Hans Flesch – the artist moves with his new instrument of revelation, leaving the studio behind to eavesdrop on the life of Berliners on an ordinary weekend. The montage he makes from his recordings onto optical sound film does not so much focus on freeing speech to talk back to a larger public, but rather these acoustic traces are snatched almost clandestinely as fragments of life ready to be molded by the ‘artist-joiner’ (Ed-

5 | Dutch feminist/historian Lilian van der Goot launched the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) in 1949, inspired by this transnational feature, *Miners Wives* (1939) (Ruhnbro, 2008).

6 | *A Newspaper Office at Night* (2LO, Dec 16, 1929) was described as a live ‘sound-picture’ (Brailsford 1929).

7 | The film overlap is also interesting: a “Feature programme” was first an “unseen but heard moving picture” (BBC 1930: 168-69), or like a ‘feature’ film or newspaper piece, a ‘special’ thing. The word then lost it’s ‘d’ becoming associated with “experimental types of radio programme as a whole.” (Felton 1949: 99).

ward Sackville-West, in Rodger 1982: 85).⁸ This amounts to a different impulse to the Manchester features' team, an innovation nonetheless (Rogers and Barham 2017: 34-39), aural equivalent of the city symphony film genre Ruttman was already known for – only this was a film without images, both broadcast by radio (1930) and 'screened' in a cinema.⁹ As with Ruttman's 'acoustic film', or the features field emerging in the BBC or with Hörbild/Hørebilleder and Hörfolge/Hörbericht (also indicating reportage), experimental composition and dramatic techniques lead to innovative new forms of non-fiction. Curiously, after 1945, the descriptors Hörbild/ Hørebilleder will largely fall from favour as German producers adopted the BBC nomenclature, feature. Hörbild/ Hørebilleder had become part of the Nazis' propaganda arsenal, thus in the postwar context these could be understood as tainted forms (Madsen 2010). In hindsight, and with the knowledge of what kind of new space, prestige and freedoms the feature could now offer, this adoption of a somewhat imprecise English term by the Germans doesn't seem odd. This label has always suggested a space for possibilities rather than rules or formulas; it should be regarded as a kind of laboratory or crucible for the emergence of new forms of radio – certainly beyond documentary.

The spread of the feature and the BBC model was arguably first enabled through the BBC's decision in 1932 to inaugurate an international 'Empire Service': programs would be disseminated through the development of a transcription shortwave service. This offered a huge number of recorded features, talks and dramas to a range of other broadcasters in multiple languages, all available on gramophone discs.¹⁰ The director of BBC Transcriptions in 1948 noted: "by the end of 1947, some 50,000 transcriptions of complete programmes will have been distributed during the year. Many of these have been milestones in British Radio" (Gale 1948: 65).

Far from being isolated from one another then, organisations like the BBC provided opportunities for exchange and collaboration between nations starting from the foundational years. To aid the war effort in the early 1940s, Australian, Canadian, South African and New Zealand producers worked for the BBC, some as war reporters or producers, and this mix of internationals, including some

8 | "The word artist means 'joiner' and the artist in radio composition is one who joins things together – words, music, all manner of sounds." (Sackville-West in Rodger).

9 | Ruttman's sound-on-film radio drama was presented at the 1930 2nd International Congress of Independent Film, Brussels demonstrating "that while film was penetrating radio culture, radio was penetrating film culture" (Ryan 2013: 261).

10 | In 1942, the Overseas division of the BBC absorbed the Empire Transcription Scheme (for the 'Dominions and Colonies'). By 1945 "recordings were made in 20 different languages and distributed in 45 countries representing 87 territories where they were broadcast from more than 500 radio stations in localities as far apart as China and South America" (BBC 1992: 15). Features ensued in many languages.

exiled from occupied countries, influenced new approaches to documentaries and reportage which the BBC encouraged. The Australian star war commentator Chester Wilmut was seconded to the BBC after brilliant reportage for the ABC live from the scene of battle (Middle East) (Crook 1998; Inglis 1983; BBC 1948). D.G Bridson recounts how in 1943, the BBC sent him to work in Canada and the USA for a year. There he met “the only American radio man who knew what actuality broadcasting implied – a folk song collector Alan Lomax” (Bridson 1969: 478). The two collaborated on *Trans-Atlantic Call*, a two-way exchange program Bridson started for BBC and CBS in London, ultimately running for 3 years. Michele Hilmes also detailed the links and collaborative transnational projects developed between the BBC and American networks like CBS, some of these from the late 1930s, and others throughout the Second World War: “as much vehicles for national prestige and propaganda as for cultural exchange” (Hilmes 2012: 147). Hilmes discovers two-way transnational impacts: BBC initial influence on the formation of the Columbia Workshop, to BBC importing ideas from this workshop later in its history, as we have seen with BBC adaptations of dramatized documentary work by Americans, eg Pare Lorentz’s *Ecce Homo/Job to Be Done* (Hilmes 2012: 125-126; BBC 1939). Norman Corwin participated in these exchanges in the war years; and his work, while widely heard via the BBC,¹¹ was also adapted for other audiences, eg Australian. Lomax made more than thirty radio and TV programs for the BBC during the 1950s, and “subsequently revealed that working for the Third Programme was his primary source of income while a song hunter in Europe” (Gregory 2002: 137).

TRANSNATIONAL INFLUENCE OF THE BBC MODEL, POST WAR ‘FEATURE’ AND DOCUMENTARY

The combination of artistic and compositional ‘research’ of the pan-European avant-gardes¹² and John Reith’s ‘mission statement’ for public service broadcasting – to inform, educate and entertain – suited the documentary idea, favouring a variety of ‘realist forms’ and documentary-informed developments in British radio. As a result, a Talks department and a Features or Drama and Features department were essential components of the BBC for many decades, with similarly named departments in other PSBs (Denmark, West Germany, Australia, Canada, South Africa...) These kinds of places and the program

11 | *An American in England* 1942 series, scores by Benjamin Britten; *An American in Russia*, 1943.

12 | Examples from Manchester and London BBC features producers also reveal the influence of documentary film makers Ruttman and Cavalcanti and Russian constructivists (see Fisher 2002): experiments or essays exploring a ‘symphonic’ or musicalized montage style can be heard in Bridson’s ‘Steel: An Industrial Symphony’ (BBC 1936) or ‘Coronation Scot’ (BBC 1938).

genres born within them were adopted most importantly in the aftermath of war and given new direction and life in these radically changed contexts.

The German ARD system in part was developed from the 'German Service' established by the BBC in 1938. NWDR in Hamburg developed under British (BBC) control in the immediate post war period and its Director Hugh Carleton Greene (later to become Director General of the BBC) encouraged the making of features and talks as part of re-education for Germany (Nerth 1966; Auer-Krafka 1980; Wagner 1997). Radio feature-makers had also already greatly lifted the prestige of the BBC in wartime including on the high profile innovative *War Report* (Madsen 2017). Millions in occupied Europe and beyond heard the BBC's 'overseas services'. Transnational efforts in features and documentaries fed back into national contexts. Future radio documentary visionaries influenced by BBC features included German writer Ernst Schnabel and Peter Leonhard Braun. Norman Corwin's 'poetic reportage' was a model for Schnabel's features (Auer-Krafka 1980). NWDR would develop radio-features independently from 1948 after the British transferred power back to German control. Here we find a key site for the continued transnational development and renovation of documentary forms in radio to the present.

We also know that from 1946 the state broadcaster of a liberated Denmark (DBC) adopted features in its revised repertoire of programs, these evolving to a high level in the ensuing years, creating a sophisticated documentary – later called 'montage' – tradition in Danish radio. This documentary output became internationally renowned beyond the 1970s through the work of producers like Niels Peter Juel Larsen but also Stephen Schwartz, an American who migrated to Denmark. These two latter producers were mentored by the Danish 'fathers' of the post war feature – Willy Reunert and Viggo Clausen. Reunert stands out as an internationally under-recognized figure in this transnational mapping of the radio documentary: an Austrian refugee from the war, he proposed high social impact features sensitive to life as it was lived. 'Dangerous radio' was his goal and legacy (see Rogilds 1989; Poulsen 2006 and in this volume). While Danmarks Radio¹³ can trace its documentary traditions back to the late 1920s and 30s with Hørebilleder, developing their own very early mobile recording to capture 'hear pictures' (1934), these traditions were re-established after the occupation under the influence of the BBC features department.¹⁴ These productive outsider spirits (Reunert, Schwartz), BBC features internationalism, and then cinema, all contribute to this distinctive 'montage' tradition.

13 | The Danish Broadcasting Corporation was first the Statsradiofonien, later becoming Danmarks Radio (1959).

14 | Laurence Gilliam, Director of BBC Features visited Denmark soon after the war (1946) and the Department was fully established by 1947 on the BBC model (Johanson, 1986: 35). Poulsen also notes BBC features were heard in Denmark during, and immediately after the war (Poulsen 1986).

The BBC also had a strong role to play in establishing Features Departments elsewhere in the new Commonwealth. Bridson brought with him a model of how a features department in Australia might operate in 1948-49: writers and creative producers should work across boundaries of drama, poetry, journalism and documentary (ABC 1948; Madsen 2017). Sustained interaction between BBC and CBC Canada in features and drama staff occurred from the war through the 1950s (eg John Reeves 1956 worked with BBC's Features/ Cleverdon), although CBC had been very active in documentary making from its earliest programs (Hogarth 2001). The BBC's post war mission embodied in features also influenced other broadcasters formerly of occupied Europe (Whitehead 1989: 10). Neo realist radio documentaries for example evolved to a high level in the post war RAI in Italy influenced by cinema, but also because "English-style journalism [...] presented [...] an essential channel for re-legitimation and recovery of credibility" with the fall of the fascists (Ortoleva 1996: 58).

As noted already, an impetus for the continuing development and spread of the feature came most markedly with the BBC's Third Programme (1946-1970). This was a 'cultural radio' project (Madsen 2007) which was also adopted in various guises by a range of other PSB and State radio organisations after the war. The idea for 'The Third' had been imagined much earlier than this at the BBC. Robert Reid in a report (1942) imagined a 'programme' which would act as the "prime re-educative agency of the post-war world" – leading to, as Whitehead argued, an "emphasis on culture as a major component of post-war broadcasting" (Whitehead 1989: 10).¹⁵ This model for a 'cultural program' (Morris 1956; Schickel 1956; Autissier 1997) provided a new kind of space internationally where much more sophisticated and unashamedly intellectual material could be nurtured.

Thanks to the new 'Third', feature makers, notably Bridson, Gilliam, Cleverdon embarked on substantial projects, involving a range of non-BBC collaborators and international commissioning. Bridson's 1960s American documentary series, also available via BBC Transcriptions (British Library sound archive), included *The Negro in America and America Since the Bomb*. In their entirety, these series represent how using the grand canvas, the audio documentary could become a powerful form for analysis, but also relay vivid experiences of current events and cultural upheaval. These two series are filled with dramatic actuality, the voices of history being made and unmade, and drawn from American sources that Bridson accessed through his networks in American radio built up over decades. In these programs, we sense the same kind of ambition and effort found in cinema's feature-documentaries. Here intellect

15 | Whitehead argues that 'The Third' in turn was influenced by the BBC's transnational Empire Service, especially its Eastern Service where, during the war, intellectual material was encouraged (Whitehead 1989).

and emotion mix; scenes made with the voices of poets, artists, ordinary people and leaders are relayed through symphonies of civil unrest transporting the listener, it feels, right into the political maelstrom of 1960s America. Most notably Bridson “jointly edited” this series of epic scale with leading black American writer Langston Hughes (BBC Third Programme Oct, Nov, Dec 1964: 3).

THE DOCUMENTARY’S RENAISSANCE LEAD FROM BERLIN AND THE FEATURE AS ‘ACOUSTIC FILM’

While the Prix Italia competition, conducted annually since 1948, encouraged distribution of international works and supported authors through significant monetary prizes – and the EBU had been providing funds and resources for documentary features by also assisting in communication between members through other events, master classes and symposia continuing to the present – German producer Peter Leonhard Braun became dissatisfied with the documentaries he was hearing (at the Prix Italia) in the mid 1960s. Few programs were entered into the documentary category: he recalls dull predictable work (Madsen Braun interview). However, BBC drama experiments in stereo actuality recording presented at the Italia Prize inspired this Berliner to explore stereo field recording in documentary, and the team at SFB soon began experimenting with new microphone techniques. By 1973, Braun won his own Prix Italia for a stereophonic epic featuring church bells and carillons recorded across Europe. A year later Braun lead the Features department at SFB.

This “acoustic film” as Braun labelled it without knowing of Ruttmann (Braun to Madsen 2004), was made on location with “5 languages, and 12,000 kilometres travelled” (Braun 1973). Here was impressive sound design with manipulation of ‘Original-Ton’ or actuality recordings in post-production. Here bells were transformed into more than sounding objects as their voices or ‘personas’ spoke back to a buried history. In this witness, Braun’s sonic consciousness comes to the fore in a performance which paradoxically registered the silencing of the bells of Europe, then their re-entry from the smelters which had turned them to degraded materiel of war. The narration is also of a ‘Mutterband’ (trans. mothertrack) style, which was an innovation of Braun’s – meaning the original narration language can be replaced with multiple other languages for international broadcast. This ‘technique’ enabled greater possibilities for trans-national adaptations: a tape would arrive for example with the original montage and sounds in place, but no narrator track. The producer simply needed to record a new narration, dub this back in, resulting in a reversioning of

the program close to the original.¹⁶ Braun commenced then in SFB following in the footsteps of his own German BBC inflected features tradition to become a visionary of the field, responsible in large part for moving the feature into a ‘new wave’ ‘acoustic film’ phase and promoting international expansion. Early in his career, in London, he had met the man we might imagine started it all, Lance Sieveking, but Braun stressed longtime BBC Features Head Laurence Gilliam was really the most important figure: creating a ‘culture of the feature’ he emulated.

A NEW WAVE FOR RADIO IN MULTIPLE SITES

The ABC in Australia in the 1970s with its cultural second network was also employing new feature makers and documentarians who looked increasingly to the USA, Canada, and to Europe for inspiration. Kaye Mortley returned to the ABC after a series of European visits with a huge array of international radio features, and new experience as a ‘metteur-en-ondes’ from Radio France’s atelier de création radiophonique (atelier). After his 1971 Churchill Fellowship tour visiting France, Italy, Germany and the UK, Drama and Features Director Richard Connolly returned with a new idea of ‘writing on tape’ from Italian RAI (cf. Malatini 1981) (Connolly 1972). The atelier influenced Connolly’s Departmental ambitions so much at the ABC that he modelled his new 3-hour show, *Sunday Night Radio 2* (1972) on Radio France’s atelier. Mortley eventually left the ABC to pursue and develop her own distinctive art of radio ‘documentaire’ with the atelier of France Culture (Madsen 2005). The work of René Farabet and this atelier offered not only a more poetic, intellectually expansive approach than she found elsewhere, but Mortley, fluent in French, was also championed by atelier founder Alain Trutat (Trutat/Madsen 2003). Farabet’s work, along with Mortley’s, made for this originally 3-hour space on the airwaves, also provoked new ways of conceiving of a radio program – as a set of poetic and intellectual propositions for the traveler-listener, but also as a sensuous ‘vagabondage’ (Farabet 1994) where reality and fiction might meet in ‘wild sound’ essays, like Mortley’s *On Naxos* (atelier 1993) (cf. Mortley 2013). The exterior public world and a more interior private one meet here, renewing the possibilities of the ‘film radiophonique’ (Farabet 1994). The very notion of documentary opened further than anywhere else conceptually through the atelier, a response to the events of May 68: here film/composition metaphors applied in quite different ways to that of Braun, connecting to cinema-vérité,

16 | Anecdotally, adaptation is much less pursued in this way today, although the internet allows for ‘Radio Atlas’, a site where a live English translation text accompanies an original language audio ‘feature’ as you listen: <http://www.radioatlas.org/>.

situationist- and fluxus-inspired art/writing. This tradition and *space* inspired beautiful sensuous ‘radio-films’ or ‘documentaire de création’ from Sydney to Helsinki to Zagreb.¹⁷

In places like Montreal at Radio Canada there had been an even earlier new wave (Brault, Perrault) which connects much more to the French film experiments, but strangely this radio-vérité moment predating cinema vérité, has been omitted from Anglophone histories (White 2009). And then other ‘experiments’ in the USA were part of the birth of NPR, and the rediscovery of ‘wild sound’ or on-the-street actuality which had experienced a sporadic history in university-educational and some public radio prior to this although the Pacifica Archives reveals a rich tradition influenced by the European feature. CBC Canada also opened spaces like its Sunday Night show, and its Ideas Series. Glenn Gould was invited to compose his contrapuntal documentaries, imagining ideas of ‘North’ (1967-1977).

This new wave then started around the same time as its film equivalents – free cinema, cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema – influencing these too, although this is an extremely repressed strand of the history of documentary. Producers had also here reached a deeper level of practice, research and reflection on their work, a thinking which accompanies, even if accidentally, the revelation associated with listening and recording and ‘writing with the microphone’ (Farabet 1994; Mortley 2013). While feature programs were regarded as “un genre artistique autonome” long before this new wave (Clausse 1945: 66), here they assumed a new authority, beauty and sophistication. Alain Trutat heralds an international art form closer to that explored by “film documentarists, Ivens, Murnau, Flaherty, Marker, Rouch” (Trutat-Madsen 2003), while his genealogy also takes us to little known visionaries of the ‘film radiophonique’ of the surrealists (eg Paul Deharme 1930). The question today might be (to conclude): does the podcast universe continue what was started possibly just over 100 years ago with the laboratory of hearing as imagined by Vertov? Or 90 years ago with Deharme or in radio’s first real ‘lab’ at the BBC where an odd group of recruits played with the dials and the sound effects imagining their kaleidophonic modernity which might offer a new audio-visionary art (Madsen 2013; Sieveking 1934) and a form which would influence a much more expansive field to come, across multiple countries and sites? There is undeniably an international field in radio/audio non-fiction forms flourishing, new creativities in the podcast big bang, unprecedented audiences...indeed these were unimaginable ten years ago. But whether the larger ‘Kraftfeld’ of features or radio films as imagined by Schnabel, Braun, Farabet, Mortley, and many more, is healthy

17 | Swedish Director of Finnish YLE, Barbro Holmberg, modelled her ‘atelier’ on the French program: to ‘study how the radiophonic language can be used to express what is significant in our time’ (Holmberg 2004).

overall, whether diverse forms and experiments are being widely supported by the key public service media who have hosted and nurtured these developments in the past – this is not so easy to assess – or predict. Will it matter or not if these organisations remain committed to, or retreat from, the documentary radio/audio project – a project which for so long has been woven into the fabric of the PSB project itself?

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