Radio Documentary and the Formation of Urban Aesthetics

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1. Introduction

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *documentary* as »a film or television or radio programme that provides a factual report on a particular subject«. However, the etymology of the word reveals a didactic impulse that we seldom associate with modern documentary[1], for it derives from the Latin words *documentum*, »a lesson« and, ultimately, from *docere*, »to teach«. Most modern documentaries, in whatever medium, are far more tentative and oblique than we would expect *lessons* to be, and we should briefly explore this paradox.

The documentary media of film, radio and television are modern, or at least relatively recent, roughly dating from the beginning of the twentieth century. In Western Europe and the United States, where these media first developed, democracy and egalitarianism were, despite some temporary aberrations, part of a general tendency. Mass literacy spread across Europe from the middle of the eighteenth century[2] and was accompanied by the growth of mass education. As social hierarchy flattened, pedagogy, especially in respect of adult education, became less overtly didactic: in many disciplines, learning became a matter not so much of what the teacher directly imparted to the student as what the student was invited to *infer*.

1 Hendy 2004.

2 Vincent 2000.

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2. Documentary Forms and Mass Media

It could be argued that when they were put to educational purposes, there was something in the very nature of the new mass media that encouraged this tendency. Film, radio and television do not readily lend themselves to didactic purposes. To deliver a lesson on the radio in the form of a speech at the microphone, or on film or television in the form of a *›talking head‹*, seemed to place a needless curb on their pictorial or representational powers. This is not to say that such *›lessons‹* did not occur, but their effectiveness was soon perceived to be limited, especially when the growth of competition in the film and broadcasting industries forced their practitioners to address and exploit the things that these media could do best. Narrative attitudes became subtler, indeed overt narration was often dispensed with altogether, and in the preoccupation of the media with those facets of the physical world that they could convey so effectively, it is hardly surprising that documentaries came to be regarded primarily as factual reports. Nevertheless, the derivation of the word »documentary« is not accidental and something of its didactic impulse persists: the documentarist's aim is to tell, or perhaps more accurately show, us something new about the world. In revealing a situation, the documentarist may seek to apprise us only of its complexity: she may have no wish to shape our attitude towards it. Nevertheless, in choosing one situation rather than another, she has a rhetorical design on us of some kind, for the very choice entails a judgement – that this situation is more worthy of our attention than an infinity of other situations. And the same exercise of judgment will apply to her treatment of it: the point of view, the choice between narration or interview or dialogue, the extent to which actuality will be used, and so on.

It is a curious fact that if one types the single word »documentary« in Wikipedia, itself a reflection of popular attitudes and ideas about culture, one receives results only for the visual media. It is even more curious that while the definitions of visual documentary use terminology such as »factual«, »informative« and so on, the Wikipedia item on radio documentary associates it with drama and notions of performance.

One explanation for this may be that in the UK, for instance, governments were anxious that the BBC, a publicly funded broadcaster, should as far as possible be non-political: it was forbidden to editorialize and it was discouraged from making programmes on political themes. For this reason, early documentaries attempted few depictions of that contemporary social reality which is more often than not »political« in its significance. Moreover, documentarists like Lance Sieveking were rather more interested in exploring the nature of the new pure-sound medium than in presenting themes of a more informative and relevant nature.[3] Consequently most radio documentaries were either

3 Sieveking 1934, 15-26.

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formal experiments, often of a fantastical kind, or poetic, dramatised evocations of distant events in British history.[4]

3. Radio and Urban Culture

Given the tension between the creative and didactic it is important to ask why we are interested in writing on early radio documentary in a book about the staging of urban soundscapes of the past. For the purposes of historical evidence? And if so, evidence of what – of the character of cities in the early twentieth century? Or of how the first radio producers sought to depict city life, or the way in which they approached the overall challenge of making documentaries in a sound-only medium?

We would suggest that the point of interest in these early radio documentaries lies not only in how they represented cities but in the fact that they are artefacts of high aesthetic value that were produced as *part* of an evolving urban culture. Radio has always been closely bound up with urbanity. The new twentieth-century technologies, of which radio was one, were the expressions of an increasingly industrial, and thus urban, society.

In the modern era of home-based networking and dispersed production, the links between industry and urbanization may not always be self-evident, but their historical association seems undeniable. The major traditional industries were without exception labour-intensive. Coal mining, steel making and shipbuilding took place in collieries, mills, factories and yards which accommodated large workforces, and they required the workforce to live nearby. This meant the development of urbanization, and the industrial revolution which took place between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries was accompanied by rural depopulation and an enormous growth in the size of towns and cities. Bound up with these trends was the need to improve the efficiency of communications, whether physical, such as canals, railways and roads, or intellectual, in the form of newspapers, mail and eventually forms of telecommunication including telephony and broadcasting. These abolished distance altogether, in the sense that »the same time« no longer presupposed »the same space«.[5] Cities had, of course, long been regarded as centres of economic and cultural activity. The word »urbane«, which derives from »urban«, »of the city« but which actually means »cultured, civilized«, tell-

4 Scannell 1986, 3-4.

5 Thompson 1995, 32.

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ingly dates from the mid-sixteenth century. The paradigm, then, was of »city-country«, »centre-periphery«: the city as a source of commodities, wealth, and thus of political life, communicating to and nourishing those who lived beyond it. It was a paradigm that in both technological and cultural terms radio effortlessly adopted. Listeners wished to be informed of life in the cities and to immerse themselves in art forms and cultural activities that the city generated.

Even when sound broadcasting was local in range and parochial in its preoccupations, its implicit paradigm was of an urban, often metropolitan, centre radiating messages to the periphery. It is an interesting observation that in the beginning, radio was both global and local but not national.[6] When Dame Nellie Melba sang her songs into the microphone at the Marconi Wireless Works in Chelmsford in 1920, they were heard in many parts of Europe and even in America. On the other hand, when British sound broadcasting became more organized a year or two later, it was in the form of stations that transmitted to local audiences not only in London but in Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Cardiff, Glasgow, Bournemouth and Aberdeen.[7] The British Broadcasting Company, which was formed in November 1922, was at first a mere organizational umbrella under which these local stations operated, but its managing director John Reith swiftly developed an integrated, national service with the metropolis, London, at its heart. By 1930 local broadcasting had vanished, while the regional services were self-evidently subordinate to the national one.[8] What Reith did, then, was to ensure that radio conformed to the prevailing cultural paradigm of city-country, except that the very nature of broadcasting – to transmit messages to *mass audiences over distances* – meant that the paradigm underwent a certain modification, a scaling-up. With radio, at least in Britain, »city-rural« becomes »metropolitan-provincial«, still of course dedicated to the diffusion of urban(e) values, but *supra*-urban in dimension. Though himself a Scotsman, Reith had little interest in local dialects, politics or cultures.

6 Hendy 2000, 21-23.

7 Hennessy 2005, 147.

8 Scannell / Cardiff 1982, 166-67.

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4. Radio and Urban Aesthetics

We are therefore interested in looking at early radio documentaries as historical evidence of radio's evolution and, at the same time, at the part radio had in forming an urban aesthetics. Although the media are often seen as observers, distributors and preservers of the most recent history of humanity, the media themselves are part of a developing urbanity and their progress as part of it is documented in their content. In this age of social media, we can see with especial clarity that content is directly affected by the ways in which it is distributed. The images, the sounds, the physical shapes and the space that the paraphernalia of broadcasting and reception occupies within public and private spaces are part of this developing culture. And in recording this culture, the media are also recording *themselves*: they are documenting their own evolution. Radio sound cannot be separated from the environment in which it transmits: it is a point of view from within.

In the case of early documentaries particularly, the radio scholar cannot help but wonder whether their purpose was not simply to ›*teach*‹ people about urbanity but to flex the medium's muscles – to help producers and audience understand how radio works and to discover the true nature of the ›*radiophonic*‹. And in doing so, they were placing the medium at the centre of urban development. By becoming accustomed to radio, people perhaps came to their own understandings of what urbanity meant. Not only was the new technology coming into their houses physically and sonically, but it carried with it the expression of a new and developing aesthetic. This aesthetic derived from three different factors: the importation of unexpected sounds from other places into the listeners' familiar environments; the corporeal element, the intrusion into the home of new technological apparatus and the association of these new sounds with the apparatus; and the new possibility of montage (although at first all editing had to be done live).

British pre-war radio was disposed to celebrate not only the technology of the medium as a whole but the technologies it incorporated, especially within dramatic and documentary programming. Among the first BBC producers to explore the creative capabilities of the medium was Lance Sieveking, who was charged with the task of developing experimental forms of radio, and who, in his book *The Stuff of Radio*, meditated at length on the extent to which traditional genres and cultural forms were modified by the special technology of radio. To exploit the character of these radiogenic forms he developed what he termed the »dramatic control panel«, essentially a primitive mixing-desk which could be used to switch between a programme's various performers in different studios, and at which the producer sat like a musical maestro organizing the whole performance.[9]

9 Scannell 1986, 3-4.

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Two notable productions which made use of the dramatic control panel were Charles Croker's *Speed: A Tragi-Comic Fantasy of Gods and Mortals* (1928) and Sieveking's own *Kaleidoscope: A Rhythm Representing the Life of a Man from Cradle to Grave* (1929). Described as »too purely radio to be printed for reading«, which suggests that it consisted at least as much of sound actuality and sound effects as of dialogue, *Kaleidoscope* used a cast of over a hundred in eight studios.[10] Both productions were self-conscious celebrations of the technology of radio, but the former, though describing itself as a fantasy, was evidently a reflection on contemporary forms of high-speed transport, and in that sense the celebration of another form of modern technology.[11] Such evidence as there is suggests that the audiences were more than a little baffled by these displays of technical virtuosity. In 1932, the *Radio Times* spoke of

> the enthusiastic mistakes of experiment . . . an over-indulgence in the mechanical element at the expense of the human.[12]

A very good example of how radio was used in order to understand itself is *Crisis in Spain*, a programme that was hailed as »the first British example of reportage in radio dramatic form«.[13] Produced by A.E. Harding and first broadcast on BBC radio on June 11th 1931, it illustrates a few points we shall elaborate on. For one thing, it is important to notice how the programme was described in the decade in which it was created. In a revival of it in 1938, the BBC announcer prepares us for it by saying:

> It is not so much the events themselves constituting the first Spanish revolution that are the subject of this programme, but the communication of them by means of telegraph, telephone, radio and print to a world awaiting news of *Crisis in Spain,* twelfth to the fifteenth of April, nineteen thirty one.

The programme is a multilingual montage of radio reports from around the world about the crisis in Spain. The blips of the telegraph are a constant sonic reminder of how these reports have reached the ears of the listener. The sound of trains going back and forth completes the impression of a new and fast-moving reality. Music is also blended into the miscellany, framing new sounds within an older, familiar art form. The aesthetics of a

10 Briggs 1981, 110.
11 Ibid., 120.
12 Ibid.
13 BBC announcer 1938.

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new and technological era are diffused through sound waves in the form of a sonic construction that resembles not only the new sonic reality but evokes an urban architecture of intertwined train tracks, radio antennas and telephone cords. The audience is listening to the development of a new world even as it is coming out of the radio speakers. In other words, a new aesthetics of broadcasting is being created *on air* as a metaphor of the new ways in which the world is going to function. Meaning is being created not strictly in what is being said, but by means of sonic orchestration. The listeners are being given the rhythm of the new world. They are introduced to the new tempo and texture of their everyday lives. Hence the editorial decisions that are implicit in this 1931 documentary afford an insight into the creation of new aesthetic forms and understandings. Although the programme was labelled »reportage«, it is aesthetically avant-garde, replete with what we would today recognize as dramatic rather than news values. The lack of a presenter/narrator is a choice that immediately allows the listener a more inferential role and makes the narrative more fluid. As the BBC announcer very tellingly observed in 1938, the emphasis is not so much on the story itself as on how it is being told. And how the story is being told carries another story within it: a history of broadcasting and a history of the development of sonic aesthetics within a brand new urban setting. The sound here works as a narrator. The story is told *with* sound. The old form of narration is abandoned, letting the audio talk for itself. Broadcasters were moving away from the old diegetic forms and exploring the idea of the radiophonic – in this case expressed as a montage of music, sound effects and broadcast voices. This intricate new form demonstrates an excitement about exploring the medium's capabilities. The programme is *composed* and produced, using sound itself as the protagonist.

5. Conclusion. Aerial Congestion

Crisis in Spain sounds like a premonition of McLuhan's »global village«, where radio is in the centre of an increasingly better connected world. The rapid intercutting of several languages and the sounds of the telegraph demonstrate an accelerating world, and this acceleration is due to newly developed and quickly evolving communication technologies. The different languages, used interchangeably and without translation, can be heard as a metaphor of the multiculturalism that came with the development of the vast modern city.

The programme lasts for an hour, which by today's standards is long, especially for a narrator-less production. The montage of telegraph sounds, radio broadcasts and music may sound repetitious to us now, but we must make allowances for its experimental

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Figure 9: Antennas on Amsterdam Roofs (1964). Original caption: Today's City View: Roofs with antennas fostering the most modern forms of leisure activities: watching television and listening to the radio.

character. It is almost as if the only reality is a *mediated* reality: without a narrator, the listener's only evidence of the events in Spain is their mediated coverage.

Radio expresses urbanity not only in terms of content but in its corporeal presence, the antennae, radio receivers, microphones, studios and so on. Aerial congestion, for instance, is very visible in the landscape of modern cities. Steven Connor has pointed out that radio interference is really a marker of the objects and bodies – including other broadcasts – that share the same space with the radio transmission.[14] Wavelength congestion mirrors all the other forms of urban congestion: buildings, people, traffic. Where you have a concentration of population, you have problems of space, a competition for space, so wavelength congestion is an extension as well as a metaphor of what happens in cities. *Crisis in Spain* expresses a congestion of voices and electronic noise that might have sounded more hectic to the early listener than to us who are used to a fast moving mediated and non-mediated polyphony. Radio thus expressed the urban in its

14 Connor 2006.

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exploitation – celebration – of technology. If the links between industrialization and urbanization are on the whole evident, the relation of technology to both will be equally so. Technology made modern industry possible, and the concentrations of population that industrial production required led to urbanization. In manufacture, transport and communications, modern cities depended heavily on technology. As we argue in this essay, radio, in Britain at any rate, was an urban, indeed a metropolitan, phenomenon. Hearing the New York announcer's voice exhorting the ether with »America calling Berlin; come in London« brought to the radio some of the qualities of the telephone, and made it seem as if the announcer's voice embodied the city itself.[15]

15 Karpf 2006, 243.

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