

LISTENING TO RADIO PLAYS: FICTIONAL SOUNDSCAPES

BY ALAN E. BECK

play RADIOplays

In the first decade of radio drama technology, the sort of devotion required of the audience was selective listening in a personally created 'zone.' "In Letters from a fond Uncle," in the BBC's weekly listings publication, the *Radio Times* of 3 February 1928, the following advice was given:

The art of listening is to make a selection from the many and varied items of the day. Mark those to which you would listen and attend to them in much the same way as if you were at a public performance. If you are able to dim the lights and prepare your mental attitude for what is coming, you get the full measure of realism every time. ("Letters from a fond Uncle", no.11)

Back in the late 1920s, when the 'fond Uncle' wrote his advice, only a fifth of the radio audience in the U.K. had a valve radio, so most struggled with the crystal set and headphones. It is no wonder that BBC producers wished to give their programmes the status of live concert performances and to remove as many distractions as possible.[1] Following the invention of FM stereo, however, the audience has had access to a more varied listening environment. Whether in a car, in the kitchen or comfortably seated with full attention, each listener creates their own 'listening zone'—which includes externally these environmental factors and extends internally into their imagination—the listening-brain mechanism that recreates the individual's 'second play' there. Ferrington has compared this to the screening of a 'movie' in the mind. Each individual becomes his or her own movie director with no two people having the same imaginary experience. (Ferrington, 1993) [2]

The director of radio drama fills the role of ideal 'ears' by selecting, focusing, and designing the sound space. The redundancy and noise experienced in real-life interaction is eliminated, sound is split from image, and fictional sound events are skillfully layered in a hierarchy where dialogue predominates. The audience of a radio drama is required to make an active commitment, an 'aural contract' with the play, interpreting the narrative and dialogue in accordance with the codes and conventions of a long radio tradition.

In contrast to what is written of film audiences, one could argue that radio listeners are not put into a passive and artificially regressive state—sitting in darkness, with the camera as proxy for the eyes. There are similarities with the aesthetics of music-listening, but radio drama is primarily dialogue—it is verbocentric. A strict hierarchy of sound is constructed. While music and sound effects (S/FXs) are balanced in importance well below the characters' dialogue and rarely share the same sound space for long, it is the dialogue that absolutely dominates the sonic flow.

In this article, I investigate how listeners to radio drama are positioned at the centre of ideal soundscapes. I will examine the differences between our everyday hearing experiences and the fictional atmos, the effects (or F/Xs), and dialogue of the radio scene, the remodelling of the soundscape into an 'atmos' (short for atmosphere) background, and its use to signal the opening of a scene, or 'sign posting' as it is termed. Because the "essential feature of sound is not its location, but that it fills space" (Ferrington, 1994), I will consider also how sound spaces are created in radio plays, the blind medium.

Soundscape and radio play atmos

The constructed atmos (atmosphere) of the radio play scene bears only some relation to real-life soundscapes. Ferrington has described three aspects of the soundscape as we live in it: "foreground sound ... which gets one's prompt attention," then "contextual sounds taking place in the vicinity of the foreground sound," and finally, 'background field' which is the "ambient soundscape" (Ferrington, 1994). He gives the example of a fire, with the fire siren as 'foreground sound,' the shouting and chaos as the 'contextual sound,' and the traffic and other urban noises as the 'background field.' This soundscape from a real-life interaction mixes human voices with other sound events, some of which are seen and some not.

Before applying Ferrington's threefold model, I have to split off the dialogue component of radio drama and consider that separately. First, I want to concentrate on the 'atmos' (as it is termed in radio play production)—the constructed and fictional soundscape of the radio play scene. It operates only under certain cultural, aesthetic and production conventions. These demand that each sound event must signify to its full weight within the overall sound picture. There is no redundancy, as each sound event is balanced within the overall picture and perspective. This lack of redundancy is one of the obvious conventions of realism in radio drama. For a radio drama operates by a much greater economy in sound events than the film soundtrack which often relegates the 'atmos' to the 'background field' behind the dialogue to establish the location of the scene—examples being traffic, bar jukebox, sea shore, and bird song.

Unlike Ferrington's real-life fire with its chaos and shouting—and indeed its intense overloading of experience for those involved, or over signification—radio drama gives a constructed emotional experience to its listeners. The analogous fire in a radio play could well be broken up into a series of rapid short scenes, building to a narrative climax, and always grasped by the listener through a strict hierarchy and succession of sound events. Each sound event can be identified with its source, even an 'unseen' or acousmatic source, as opposed to our limited hearing abilities in real-life interaction which are so much less direct than visual perception.

Signposting

Ferrington's first aspect of the live soundscape is the "foreground sound ... which gets one's prompt attention" (Ferrington, 1994). His example is the fire siren's screaming forward into the listener's consciousness with special significance. One typical use of this foreground sound in radio drama is in 'signposting,' the technique for establishing location at the beginning of many scenes. F/Xs are most often created either from the CD radio drama library (car arriving on gravel, traffic, street atmos, champagne cork popping) or by Spot technicians in the studio (knock on door, tea cups, tapping on computer keyboard). All sound events in the radio scene require an acoustic—the environment of the sound event—and

often a verbal context, so this location signposting will often be accompanied by some descriptive dialogue to let the listener know where the characters are.

Here are some examples from scene openings:

1. F/X MAN DIGGING IN OPEN FIELD WITH EXERTION.
2. WIFE (arriving) Still digging the carrots, Tony?

– OR –

1. F/X JANE TYPING DESPERATELY AND SIGHING.
2. HUSBAND (entering) How's the book going, or dare I ask?

Signposting has the same function as the establishing shot in film but has to operate much more rapidly. Of course 'foreground sound' events also occur in the middle of a scene, depending on the story line—machinery, running, gunshots in a murder mystery and thunder in a ghost story. It has to be admitted that although radio drama directors often say 'you can do anything on radio,' the fact is that some 'foreground sounds' do not come over convincingly, such as a gun going off near the sound centre, that is, the centre of the sound picture for the listener. Gunshot as an F/X has too much of an attack and the broadcast result must often come over as a 'pop'—especially as treated for medium wave or AM reception.

Signposting is created even more by the character's voices than by technicians. It is not enough to put an actor into the studio 'set,' as it is called, with screens and other effects. The characters have to inhabit the scene—the open field, the dining room and the study in these examples—by their playing, an example of the many special techniques of radio acting [3]. They also contribute by grunting, clearing their throats, inhaling and exhaling, and other voicings which establish their presence and sometimes their 'entrances.' The term for these, to distinguish them from words ('voco-' rather than 'verbo'), is paralinguistic utterances.

Radio drama's middle ground

Ferrington's second category is 'contextual sounds taking place in the vicinity of the foreground sound' (Ferrington, 1994). These inhabit the middle ground between the foreground sounds and the ambient 'background field.' In his example of the fire siren, these contextual sounds are the shouting and chaos. Radio drama's middle ground is a fascinating area because often it does not exist, due mainly to the primacy of the dialogue. Characters and 'atmos' are arranged as figure and ground in the sound picture and actors are clustered at the centre of the sound picture. This suits the many scene locations—domestic and indoors, in a car, or outdoors—as characters talk to each other rather than shout across a distance.

In production terms, radio drama directors create two types of sound pictures for scenes: either what I term the 'up-front' style at the microphone by positioning (or 'blocking') the actors within a narrow field, or secondly, by allowing the actors to roam more widely in a more 'opened-out' set. The listener gets more of an 'opened-out' impression of the location if the sound 'frame' is about fifteen feet and more. Otherwise, you hear a character arriving through the door and then suddenly he or she is there at the sound centre, having bounded across the room. Space does not operate in radio drama as it does on-stage or on the screen, where the physicalities of the time-space continuum rule visibly. Economy of movement, and even cheating the action, usually suit the radio script.

There are examples where Ferrington's 'contextual sounds,' or their fictional equivalent, usefully enter the middle ground. Here I am restricting myself to 'F/Xs' and 'atmos,' and to what they bring into dialogue. There are creative touches which can add to the emotion and tension of a scene—especially in radio genre plays where 'F/Xs' can be used more plentifully, as opposed to realist plays with stretches of 'talking-heads' dialogue. So in a SCI-FI montage, after giving the listener an aural 'sweep' over a dystopic urban landscape and establishing the rumbling of futuristic traffic in the distance, we hear the barking of guard dogs somewhat nearer. Or in a tense domestic scene, again with background traffic, a police siren wails just before a vital revelation or a tense pause. Even a phone ringing in a next-door office can provide tension, or crackle and static on a phone line just as the lover's conversation becomes emotional.

These are little peaks or intrusions from the background which serve to push the tension up a notch which a director can use to punctuate the rhythm of a scene. Their function is affective more than anything else, and they operate, in terms of signification, both as an iconic element representing an event, and as a symbolic one—that is to say the dog's barking or the phone ringing operates on more than one level at the same time.

'Atmos' background

'Atmos' is often the main business of 'F/X'-ing in the radio drama production cubicle. The effects catalogue from BBC Enterprises Ltd. is wide ranging—main line railway station, art gallery, shopping centre, animals, jungle habitats, and crowds, among many. There is a careful functional balance in each of these, combining a continuous mix at a background level without blurring the listener's sensibility. It is too easy to lose the listener's awareness of this lower sonic layer after its initial introduction and so it must be 'tweaked up' every so often by the Studio Manager through the dialogue. 'Atmos' comes in at a higher level for signposting purposes at the top of a scene after which it is brought under, and kept under.

Wreford Miller, in his masterful *Silence In The Contemporary Landscape*, uses the visual metaphor 'flatline' to define today's oppressive and repetitive machine sounds. He states that the effect of little variance in energy output results in a sound with a consistent intensity level. These sounds contain too much redundancy, too little difference to contain relevant information to the human organism, with the result that they are communicatively disruptive, and our hearing systems adapt to them. (Miller, 3b)

Radio drama 'atmos' must avoid becoming a 'flatline sound' and so must contain enough "discrete sound events, rhythm" (Miller, 3b) and irregularity to function. 'Atmos' in a play can never become 'background field' (Ferrington, 1994). It is over to production to give a skillful balancing and to allow the 'atmos' to intrude as little peaks into that middle ground I described above.

As a teacher of radio drama, I encourage my students to listen and invent freshly and innovatively, and not to rely solely on CDs. So they venture forth with their recording equipment, and they observe and mix their own soundscapes. It is too easy and lazy to script and produce 'industrial' radio drama scenes, as I call them, designed and executed only from

catalogue numbers of pre-recorded effects.

There is an amusing BBC example of the overuse of a particular CD effect. A woman farmer from Wales in the U.K.—a devoted radio listener—spotted a particularly distinctive cow 'F/X' as being used too often in the BBC farming soap, "The Archers." She complained that the same cow was heard mooing from four separate farms. The soap production team, confessing their overuse of a track from the BBC bovine effects CD, stated that "we have decided to send it to market."

Hierarchy of sound layers

The fundamental principle of radio drama production is a strict hierarchy of sound layers. The dialogue is primary, even more starkly arranged in a figure-and-ground relationship against 'F/Xs', 'atmos' and music than that which Ferrington observes of real-life interaction:

A sound may become a figure given its intensity, volume, pitch, rhythm, or especially the attention of the listener ... sound figures can be natural in occurrence or selected by the will of the listener. (Ferrington, 1994)

For the audience of a radio play, that selection has already been made by the director and playwright. I have mentioned previously the different ratio between figure-and-ground, where the middle is often missing. This does not deprive the listener. Instead, it requires a quantity and quality of mental effort which the audience values.

Harmony and counterpoint

The pictorial analogy of figure-and-ground may be too static for the ongoing mix of sound events. Another analogous relationship has been suggested by Michel Chion in the context of film—harmony and counterpoint as dual systems in music—for the visual and sound tracks and their interconnections (Chion, 35). Chion defines harmony, for the purpose of his cinematic model, as involving "the relations of each note to the other notes heard at the same moment, together forming chords" and sees it as a vertical relationship; while counterpoint constitutes "two parallel and loosely connected tracks, neither dependent on each other" (Chion, 35-6). The contrapuntal model is the horizontal, where instruments and voices pursue relatively independent courses.

These are two divergent tendencies in cinema aesthetics, especially prominent in the transition from silent film to the talkies and in formalist controversies of the 1920s and 1930s. For my purposes, it is fascinating to make note of this dualism, and to transfer it over to radio drama dialogue and its balancing 'atmos', even though we are dealing with one signifying system, the aural. These two types of construction offer different choice relations in designing and balancing the radio scene. Both are tied to the ongoing chain of serial progression—the overall sequence or parataxis—because radio drama is an art form in time. Counterpoint, with its predominantly horizontal and parallel relationship, is the least observable in radio drama practice and for good reason. Rarely, for example, is dialogue and a music track mixed together with equal signification and at equal levels, as in film. The broadcast result would confuse and deter listeners [4].

A radio scene, which is not just of the 'taking-heads' variety and in a neutral acoustic, could mix the following four layers: dialogue between characters, the atmos background, spot effects in the studio, and perhaps music at the top and tail of the scene. The relationship of these is rather the vertical, harmonic relationship, the first of the two models I cited from Chion. Each layer, with each sound an event in itself, enters into a simultaneous, vertical relationship with the others. Like harmonic principles in music, the vertical matching, overlapping, balancing, and contrasts, form an ongoing dynamic. Fortunately it is in the nature of sound that these different layers can be edited together without being noticed, whereas every visual cut in film immediately strikes us.

Space in the radio drama scene

Listening to radio plays before the mid-1970s, when stereo production properly became the norm, it is noticeable how 'flat' many scenes are, most often being produced in a neutral acoustic. There is relatively little use of 'atmos' to convey place, the radio equivalent of theatre's 'mise en scene' or scenic picturisation. There are good broadcasting reasons for this. Maybe that is why in some of the great classics of the 1950s, of Samuel Beckett and Dylan Thomas, the characters and indeed the listeners can be moved around so urgently. Stereo offers only a limited experience of three-dimensional space, but it is a convention we accept—just as depth in cinema and television is also illusory, as the image is actually flat. The greatest division in radio scenes is between domestic spaces—where there is little or no opportunity for sound to fill the limited space, and where movement on carpets and soft furnishings does not 'read' for the listener—and larger resonant spaces, such as fantasy castles, factories, and open landscapes.

Radio drama suffers in this respect from the dominance of 'hearth plays' and realism in our culture. Directors often worry about the 'ping-pong' nature of dialogue, back-and-forth between characters, with little opportunity for movement. It is no surprise that radio drama is regarded both as the actors' medium and the playwrights' medium, and that directors are undervalued.

Time in radio drama

Because in radio dialogue has the most importance, there is the imposition of a linear and 'real' time through the serial unfolding of the plot. Characters' talk imposes everyday time as the overall rhythm, a fictional 'talk-time,' even in radio play modes which are non-realist. Although abrupt transitions are often scripted, from scene to scene, radio drama is usually locked into the time-space continuum of real life. The rare exceptions are radio montage and short intercut segments of dialogue, usually within a time-reversal dream in a character's mind. Film can leap in both time and location, as indeed radio can, but radio dialogue must exist within what I call a narrative 'talk-time,' a linear continuity.

Finally, the whole radio drama apparatus encourages an impression of reality. I use the term 'radio apparatus' for the whole network of production and editing, in and out of the studio, from microphones to broadcasting, and to the listeners. Because radio drama is so dialogue-based, the apparatus itself gives an impression of reality—the experience, after all, of the continuous real-life soundscapes at the centre of which we are continuously placed, as social actors in the script of our everyday lives.

Alan E. Beck is a lecturer in Drama at the University of Kent at Canterbury (U.K.), and a BBC Research Fellow in Radio Drama.

NOTES

1. The first radio drama broadcast was on 16 February 1923, from the British Broadcasting Company's Marconi House on the Strand in central London. The programme had scenes from Shakespeare's works. The first radio play originally written for radio, a radio 'origination' as it is called, was Richard Hughes' 'Danger', set down a coal mine where the lights go out, and was broadcast on 14 January, 1924. For a history, see Drakakis 1981, chapter 1. The income in 1995 from commercial radio advertising in the U.K. in 1995 amounted to 270.2 million U.K. pounds. I include radio ads here because many of them can be analyzed as 'mini-dramas.'

2. Ferrington 1993 in the section 'Theater of the mind'. See also Frances Gray in Lewis 1981 p.49

3. My book, *Radio Acting*, will be published in June 1997 by A & C Black, London.

4. There is a long history of listeners' complaining about 'thumpy' effects and music. An example is 'Radio Times' 4 November 1932 p.333 'Both sides of the microphone': 'Simplicity should be one of the principal qualities of the radio play. It is never easy for the listener to follow what comes to him so unexpectedly from this loud-speaker.'

Bibliography

Chion, Michel. "Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen" edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman: Columbia University Press, 1994 (from "L'Audio-Vision": Editions Nathan, Paris, 1990).

Crisell, Andrew. "Understanding Radio": Methuen, 1986.

Drakakis, John. (ed.) "British Radio Drama": CUP, 1981.

Ferrington, Gary. "Audio Design: Creating Multi-Sensory Images For The Mind": *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 1993. Also published at: www.interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/WFAEResearch/sndesign in the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE) Articles and Research Documents section.

Ferrington, Gary. "Keep Your Ear-Lids Open." *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 1994. Also in the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE) Articles and Research Documents section.

Lewis, Peter. (ed.) "Radio Drama": Longman, 1981.

Miller, Wreford. "Thesis: Silence in The Contemporary Soundscape," file date: May 21, 1995, www.interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/FC/readings/Thesis.pdf Chapter 3. (PDF FILE)

Moseley, Sidney. "Letters from a fond Uncle," no 11: Do we listen reasonably? *Radio Times* 3 February 1928.

The fundamental principle of radio drama production is a strict hierarchy of sound layers.

