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Holes in the Head

A Theatre for Radio Operations

Gregory Whitehead

THE HUMAN *porus acousticus* is not just another hole in the body; it's a hole in the head, a hole that permits sound waves to pass first through the tympanum, wind through a tricky labyrinth into the brain, and finally migrate as residual electric impulses throughout the body. 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.*

The sound of spoken language is a special case because it draws into play another organ that depends on vibrating flesh, an intricate system of delicate vocal folds tuned to the frequency of its own vibrations even when following a prescription. Oral litany: we know that the voice has body, and when we speak face-to-face, we see that it is connected to another body, the rest of the body, and that body has a name. You can put your finger on it, and when its vocal body performs it either leaves you speechless or it leaves you cold.

Radiowaves turn up the juice on the oral/vocal body due mostly to the misplaced and unnameable identity of radiophonic space. 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.

Sentenced to death by electrocution, it should come as no surprise that the radiobody is chronically plagued by headaches, brain damage, and a plain bad case of nerves. But while all acts of transmission may shock bodies out of their brains, dead language still lives on air, making the well-holed afterthought of the radiobody a critical question for radio art. *What is it made of, and what does it want?*

Leaks

Successive generations of technology do not so much displace as *digest* each other. Marinetti understood this very well, and urged his Futurist comrades to *cook* the books so as to facilitate digestion. Churning through several generations of media, such digestion is never complete: dissect a radio, and you will find the remains of a book; dissect the book, and you will find the remains of a larynx; dissect the larynx, and you will find the skeletal trace of a twitching finger, lighting a match and sending a telegram; take the prints from the finger, and there you will rediscover the origins of radio.

All the above stages of digestion do produce one thing in common—gas leaks, from one hole or another. What we usually classify as *interference* is in fact the direct acoustic representation of leaking gas, the potentially explosive product of radiophonic digestion. This gas, a natural product of the radio body digesting itself (time decay through weak signal processing), is a key material for radio art, and is best stored in glass bottles with cork stoppers.

Example: In 1984, I conducted an interview with a retired businessman named Steven V. N. Powelson for inclusion within my radio docufiction *Dead Letters*. Powelson's ambition for the remaining years of his life was to become the first individual ever to recite by memory the entire *Iliad* in the original Greek. A curious ambition, given the status of the *Iliad* as a consensual transcription of group performance most probably enacted over several nights; now it would be recited by one individual in a book-learned dead language, through a single rapid fire endurance monologue. The idea only makes sense if you read backwards in time. Even more curious was his motive, *to achieve immortality by attaching myself to a poem that is itself immortal.*

By having the whole text written into his own body at once, Powelson believed (and I suppose still believes) that he could essentially become one with the body of the text. But since there is no "original recording" of the *Iliad*, Powelson would memorize by listening to his own book-on-

tape. Because the text is full of difficult tongue-twisters, he had to mouth the text as he read, training lips and tongue. In effect, Powelson was lipping (and digesting) *himself*, a novel form of auto-erotic behavior. Sometimes, the procedure gave him a serious headache. After all, the *Iliad* is one of the bloodiest war stories in the history of Western literature and Steven V. N. Powelson was an avowed pacifist.

Memorization is self-inscription; drop stylus to perform oral recitation. Taking such a vast quantity of bloody text into a retired body already beginning to peter out does raise serious questions of phonographic technique. Powelson described the procedures of his private memory theatre by way of analogy: Picture a row of leaky buckets, with each bucket representing a book of the *Iliad*. As each successive bucket was filled (perhaps with his own brain fluid), water in the other buckets would gradually leak out, and Powelson would then go back and fill them up again. As each new book added a new book/bucket, each step towards immortality put another hole in Powelson's head.

I have no idea whether Powelson has achieved his ambition, but by airing his strange *Iliad* odyssey on radio, I could at least help bring the intermedia cycle full circle. War stories, holes in the head and the leakage of partially digested dead language—in this vocabulary, radio is perfectly capable of speaking for itself.

Needles

Sometimes when you try to talk about radio art in public, you get needed. At a (rare) conference on Sound & Art a few years ago, I presented a brief series of remarks about how radio 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. Electrical currents express dead labor before they give voice to anybody else. The more dead the transmission, the more “alive” the acoustic sensation; the more alive the sensation, the more “dead” the source body has become.

When I finished, a hand started waving at the back of the auditorium, though through the stage lights I was unable to see the face of its owner. So The Hand said, somewhat urgently, *Hey Whitehead, you gotta believe . . . you gotta believe that it's better to talk to livin' people than to talk to dead people!*

The real problem, of course, is how to tell the difference, a problem that was very much in evidence during my own “live” broadcasting de-

but. The program/performance centered around staging a fake New Age call-in show designed to allow listeners a live consultation with the reknowned Dr. Vicekopf, chief language analyst at the Paul Broca Memorial Institute for Schizophonic Behavior. Listeners were invited to call in and offer their most peculiar linguistic behaviors for deep brain analysis. Our expectation was that everyone would realize right away that this was just a language game, and that we would end up mixing telephonic glossolalias into the World's Largest Takeout WortSalat.

Instead, we were confronted with a number of listeners who desired serious consultation. Some, of course, just *heard* other voices (*they've been telling me I'm a schizophrenic—but after listening to you, I think I may be a schizophonic*) but others described various forms of uncontrollable voices that would erupt from their throats at the most embarrassing times. Several were acutely aware that their language had become infected by the electronic media, that their language was in fact no longer their own, and often found themselves talking like cartoon characters (*beep beep*) or American Presidents (*Well, no, I have no memory of that*) against their will.

Any committed schizophonic will tell you that those born into the dense saturation of the electronic media have no choice but to swallow an overwhelming quantity of pre-packaged lingual emissions, from down n' dirty drive time jingles to spotless digital recordings of Handel's *Messiah*. Sit-com patter becomes fused in the memory with the speeches of candidates and the numbing rhythms of traffic reports and weather forecasts.

Needles are an inescapable fact of life for the schizophonic, and still amply animate the radiobody even if laser beams have made it possible to get off without them. As the possibility of public discourse collapses into communal lip-sync extravaganzas, perhaps the most direct form of radio art (and certainly the cheapest) is to simply get wired, stick a needle in the brain and *spin those tubes baby, cause you're a tightly twisted, roller derby brand a' wild thing!*

Shake, Rattle n' Roll

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, and can be embellished in all kinds of ways, making room for everything from *Finnegan's Wake* to Street Rap: radio

as Universal Language, Electronic Community, Planetary Boombox, Here Comes Everybody, *like let's just hang out and tell stories and maybe dance.*

Radio Talking Drum—a utopian transposition that loves to forget. *Most* forgotten are the lethal wires that still heat up from inside out, wires that connect radio with warfare, brain damage, rattles from necropolis. When I turn my radio on, I hear a whole chorus of death rattles: from stone cold, hard fact larynxes frozen in every stage of physical decomposition; from talk show golden throats cut with a scalpel, transected, then taped back together and beamed out across the airwaves; from voices that have been severed from the body for so long that no one can remember who they belong to, or whether they belong to anybody at all; from pop monster gigglebodies guaranteed to shake yo' booty; from artificial folds sneak-stitched into still living throats through computer synthesis and digital processing; from mechanical chatter boxes dead to begin with; from cyberphonic antibodies taking flight and crashing to pieces on air.

In November 1988, I had the good fortune to experience one of those infrequent opportunities to become abruptly and eternally united with one's own metaphors. While en route to Australia, my flight, a Boeing 747 stuffed with tour groups, came very close to crashing on take-off from Honolulu. With stabilizing flaps damaged by metal bars that had broken away from the landing gear, the plane barely lifted off the ground before it began to rattle violently.

In the wake of each fresh plane crash, I confess to reading survivor accounts with intense curiosity, and keep voluminous files. Such accounts almost invariably refer to *violent rattles* moments before disaster, so as the luggage compartments sprang open above our heads, I felt certain we were seconds away from rattling right into a burn unit. But the Qantas pilot immediately lightened our load by dumping thousands of liters of fuel into the Pacific Ocean, and we lumbered back to Honolulu airport for a surprisingly uneventful emergency landing.

Several hours later, in a typically incongruous late-twentieth century change of scene, I sat watching the surfers ride the waves at Waikiki, a Qantas complimentary cocktail in hand. I thought about other waves, *airwaves*, the risks of mechanical vibration. I thought about all the radio art transmissions that dump their fuel and make premature landings, about the countless audio aircraft that never arrive at their true destinations, or that shake, rattle n' roll violently without coming to the climax. And after three or four more complimentary cocktails, I thought about the crash/rattled post-Rodez body of Antonin Artaud, thereafter resurrected as Artaud, Le Môme.¹

When Artaud was finally released from his psychiatric internment at Rodez, his body had been thoroughly wasted by the nervous explosions of his mental illness, externally administered electroshock treatment, frequent insulin injections and a terminal case of (undiagnosed) rectal cancer. Convulsed by electricity, and with disease spreading inward from the anus, Artaud returned to Paris in 1946. From this time on, his vision of a *body without organs*, with its promise of pure redemption, takes center stage.

Artaud's desired new body, stripped bare, scraped clean and turned inside out, quickly assumed a pseudonym. Le Mômô: the pure energy of direct brainwave transmission, born from an occult synthesis of needles, electricity and a cacophony of irrefutable inner voices. Le Mômô: giving voice to the prosthetic language of the *disembody*, the antibody, the radiobody. Le Mômô: full of vocal flatulence, noisy jolts, black magic and bloody nothings.

In 1947, Artaud Le Mômô gave voice to his final public pronouncement, *To Have Done With the Judgment of God*, a lacerating, scatophonic performance scheduled for national broadcast on February 2, 1948, but cancelled at the last minute by the Director of French Radio, one Wladimir Porché. The official explanation rounded up all the usual suspects—obscenity, sacrilege, anti-Americanism. But after listening to a tape of the broadcast, one suspects the presence of a deeper fear, the fear that Artaud Le Mômô might yet reverse the voltage and wire countless brains to the shock treatment of his unearthly howls, jolting a million ears into the next world. As Le Mômô himself writes: *The magic of electric shock drains a death rattle, it plunges the shocked one into that death rattle with which one leaves life.*

Radio Art Le Mômô

Those who live, live off the dead. Our deepening collective schizophrenic disorder is rooted in the electronic severance of the voice from the body, *what the Tarahumaras of Mexico call the spittle of the grater, the smut of toothless coal.* The circularity of cutting into/casting out radiobodies gives radio performance an inescapable post-mortem quality; *man is sick because he is poorly made.* Each radio transmission embraces the post-mortem recollection of beings that have been physically dispersed across multiple generations of media abstraction. *We must decide to strip him bare in order to scratch out this animalcule that makes him itch to death.* There's no reason to be squeamish about autopsies when the possibilities for stitching together new and highly charged radiobodies are so enticing, their future so full of promise!

Breaking the Reality Radio taboo (yes, I *am* going to offer you the

chance to take this unruly clot of dead bodies, gas and all, into your very own nervous system), and transmitted from every unholy organ *menendi anenbi*, the prosthetic, shocking bodies of Radio Art Le Mômô catch brain fever, break wind and create a disturbance—through otherworld spirits (Marinetti), aliens from outer space (Welles), itching animalcules or microbes of God (Artaud). *The fact is I was being pressed right up to my body and right up to the body and it is then that I shattered everything because my body is never to be touched.* But once the voice is cut loose from the body, it becomes available for manipulation, and when utterances become things, anything can happen.

Gas leaks, shock needles and death rattles all give life to the wired bodies of Radio Art Le Mômô, so watch out for your holes: *I have to complain of meeting in electro-shock dead people whom I wouldn't have chosen to see.*

NOTE

1. For more extensive discussion of Artaud's language/body post-Rodez, and a remarkable analysis of Artaud's radio work, see two recent essays by Allen Weiss: "K," in *Art&Text* no. 37 (summer, 1990) and "Radio, Death and the Devil," in Douglas Kahn/Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde* (forthcoming). For a related discussion of radio and language/body decay, see my own *Principia Schizophonica*, in the same issue of *Art&Text*. Italicized passages in this section of the essay are from Clayton Eshleman's translations of Artaud, *Le Mômô*, published in *Conductors of the Pit* (New York, Paragon House, 1988) and *To have Done With the Judgment of God*, included in *Wireless Imagination*.

Gregory Whitehead has been exploring radiophonic holes in the head since 1983; his most recent works are *Lovely Ways to Burn* and *Degenerates in Dreamland*.