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Book review

Radio: Essays in Bad Reception by John Mowitt

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WHEN DRAFTING A THEORY OF RADIO, what is the object of your enquiry? Is it the cultural technology coupled with the social output? Do you court the artefact or the institution of radio? And how do you navigate the fond reflections on radiophonics and the broadcaster's voice without falling into mythologies?

In the late 1990s and early 2000s there was something of a boom in theories on audio art and sonic culture. Many of the key texts focused on radio and its history of mediating the sonic arts, both as a broadcasting medium and as a creative material. The main players in this discourse are Allen S. Weiss on the poetics of transmission; Douglas Kahn on experimental sound work; and Brandon La Belle noise as a cultural product.¹ Their books deal either directly with, or are influenced by, the relationships between aesthetics of analogue media and Modernisms.

In contrast, Mowitt's *Radio: Essays in Bad Reception* is about the socio-political theory that has commented on radio throughout its history. Here the focus is not the object itself but the philosophies that have fretted, enthused and bore witness to the social effects of the broadcasting body. As a cascade of societal events, Mowitt uses radio to reflect on the present condition of poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, the dialectic and Marxist theory. This is

radio as ‘an *apparatus*’, a historicised ‘network of social interactions’ and an ancestry of ‘listening techniques’.²

Unlike many of the art and literature-orientated books on radio, in *Bad Reception* we do not get a philosophising over the sensation of radio with extensive run-downs of Ezra Pound, Charles de Gaulle or Orson Welles thrown in. This is not a history of the avant-garde, a memorialising of the BBC, nor a romancing of information theory.³ Rather, each chapter in *Bad Reception* uses radio as a space to experiment in posing theoretical concepts against each other. Its aim is to examine the relationships between radio, philosophy and the political. For Mowitt, radio is a ‘problem’ to be engaged with. It is a question about social thought and how it is impacted on by mass media.

He begins by observing that the recent enthusiasm for radio is in fact a return to sound and more specifically the voice, as a philosophical category. Mowitt attributes this to a debatable waning of the critique of phonocentrism as propagated by Derrida. He attends to this in a thorough grounding of his investigation into the distinctions between linguistics and acoustics. At this point the heart sinks a little as we are returned to a poststructuralist rumination on meaning, voice and presence as mitigated by sound. However, once he has recovered what he wants from the debate—the acoustic void within the voice as an object of meaning—the discussion regains flight and interest via Dolar, Agamben and Cage.

In the following chapters Mowitt pairs up contrasting social commentators and schools of thought in order to test the various ethics brought into question through the models of collectivity created by radio broadcasting. The most interesting and successful of these counterpoints are the critiques of Sartre and Benjamin, who respectively questioned what is at stake in terms of the self and the social in the wake of mass media. For Sartre the concern was the plight of the subject in alterity. Radio was another system in which the individual was separated and reconnected to society but in a state of ‘being alone together’.⁴ By contrast, Benjamin is concerned with the public reception of the radio voice. He observes how the public both realises and writes its own *public-ness* through encounters with the radio broadcast. For Sartre radio broadcasting is a systemic practice of restricting human freedom through interiorising a sense of exteriorisation. For Benjamin, this was the case to an extent depending on the specific usage, which Benjamin famously devotes many texts to Brecht’s successes in operating the delicacies of transmitting the radio voice into domestic spaces.

Mowitt is interested in writers (for example Sartre, Benjamin, Adorno, Austin) who spoke on and over radio, taking delight in the confusing prepositioning in the phrase ‘on the air’. The most interesting destination of this line of enquiry is a consideration of the consequences of “switching off”. Is it possible to opt out and come off air? For Sartre to switch off is a hopeless act of self-negation. The listener doesn’t negate the voice, only oneself still in the group. For Benjamin switching off the voice in the living room is an act of sabotage that likewise does not cancel out the voice just leaves the shock of its intimate absence.

Mowitt pairs up Lacan and Guattari, and ‘scans’ the interactions of radio through the channels of psychoanalysis. He questions how therapy operates via radio and how identities disseminate. How does thought occur through and on radio? Further questions of recognition and encounter are posed against attempts to theorise a psychology of radio. “The question is not whether one hears voices on the radio and how psychoanalysis might approach them but whether radio is a voice, and if so whose.”⁵

Throughout the text Mowitt moves between mediations on radio as-such and radio itself, passing over 'radiophonic encounters' between Marxism and phenomenology. He gives some informative reflections on writers' various case study-style analyses of significant radio events that give radio-theory a present and urgent criticality. These range from 'grass-roots' radio movements, broadcast operations of political resistance and radio's transcendence of national, political and frequency borders. This discussion operates across chapters on Radio-Alger in decolonization and local radio station movements in Birmingham (U.S.A), both of which comment on the imbalanced status of the voice in political engagement.

Similarly to Dolar's popular mediation on the voice from 2006,⁶ this book offers a survey of theory that leads towards an ontology of radio. With a mix of creative re-classifying of the history of radio critique and stable engagement with models of philosophy, Mowitt's book does well to locate what *matters* about radio. What we get in the end is the idea that radio is something that's happening *to* society, continuously eventing and impacting. It's also something that's continuously happening to thought, and this interpolation on our radio-led thinking is a refreshing intervention.

Notes

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- ¹ Allen S. Weiss, *Experimental Sound and Radio* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996); Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994); Brandon LaBelle, *Radio Memory* (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2008).
 - ² John Mowitt, *Radio: Essays in Bad Reception* (University of California Press, 2011), p.1.
 - ³ For a substantial account of the historical link between Modernism, literature and radio see Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle and Jane Lewty, *Broadcasting Modernism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).
 - ⁴ Mowitt. p. 58.
 - ⁵ Mowitt. p. 114
 - ⁶ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

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