
Listening to radio plays: fictional soundscapes

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Introduction

1.1

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. ¹

Here is an extreme example of selective listening in a personally created 'zone' and the sort of devotion that was required in the first decade of radio drama technology. In this article, I investigate what happens when listeners to radio drama are positioned at the centre of ideal soundscapes. The redundancy and noise we experience as hearers in real-life interaction are eliminated, sound is split from image, and fictional sound events are skillfully layered in a hierarchy where dialogue predominates. Radio drama remodels the soundscape in to an 'atmos' (short for atmosphere) background, and uses it often 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' ², I will consider also how sound spaces are created in radio plays, in the blind medium.

1.2

In my discussion, I move back and forth between our everyday hearing experiences and the fictional atmos, effects or F/Xs, and dialogue of the radio scene. In our real-life interactions, we play an active role in selectively hearing and focusing, part of which is called the 'cocktail-party effect' ³.

The radio drama director fills the role of ideal 'ears', selecting, focusing and designing, though the audience actively play their part in the construction of the 'second play' in their heads. Moving backwards from this fictional world may well give us further insights into our hearing roles in real life. Radio drama offers many pleasures and rewards, and it enables us to develop richer sensitivities of listening. Perhaps the desires it awakens in us flow originally from the 'uterine darkness' ⁴ in which we heard our mother's voice, with what is claimed to be the first of our senses to develop.

As well as its part in world culture, and over fifty nations participate in the international Prix Futura and Prix Italia competitions, BBC radio drama still resists that 'commodification of the soundscape .. in commercial radio' condemned by Wreford Miller ⁵ due to the principle of public service broadcasting.

1.3

Back in the late 1920s, when the 'fond Uncle' wrote his advice, only a fifth of the radio audience in the UK 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 disattention factors as possible. Through the crackle, in the previous fortnight, there was the opportunity to hear a lot of radio drama, from classics originally from the stage such as Maeterlinck's 'The Blue Bird' (1908) and J.M. Synge's 'The Playboy of the Western World' (1907), to 'Courtship - Ancient and Modern, a comedy in two scenes by Fanny Morris Wood'.

Listening to radio drama is not hearing. I follow Gary Ferrington's distinction, 'listening requires a quantity of mental effort' ⁶. The radio drama audience 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 BBC tradition. In return, the listener gains pleasure and a focus of desire on the narrative and characters, and often an identification with the protagonist. There are differing environments of listening, whether in a car, on the kitchen radio or comfortably seated with full attention, as the 'fond Uncle' recommended long before the invention of FM stereo. 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 an 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. ⁷

1.4

In contrast to what is written of film audiences, we 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, whereby 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.

2.1

BBC Radio Drama

I need to give some current information about radio drama in the UK, which is almost totally the monopoly of the BBC, the 'National Theatre of the Air'. The combined output of the BBC Radio Drama Department and Light Entertainment's comes to some twenty-two hours of radio drama a week. Add to this total the longest-running soap in the world, 'The Archers', 'an everyday story of country folk', which began on 1 January 1951 and is still going strong with daily 15-minute episodes Monday to Friday, and an hour's repeat on Sunday. This makes radio drama one of Britain's main artistic enterprises, though one of the most undervalued, employing about 14,000 actors a year and with a budget of perhaps 40 million UK pounds. (Financial details are not released.)

The cost of an hour's radio drama on Radio 4 averages at 11,000 to 14,000 UK pounds; and Radio 2's more popular entertainment comes out at between 11,000 and 27,000 UK pounds. Regular audiences for afternoon plays range from 200,000 to over a million. So it can be seen that drama is radio's most expensive product by far, outclassed only by the occasional live-relay opera on Radio 3. In the BBC, it is a remarkable tradition that needs protecting, although too often it feels itself to be a 'Cinderella', ignored by critics and theorists. We are soon to celebrate its seventy-fifth birthday in 1998. ⁸

3.1

Soundscape and radio play atmos

The constructed atmos (atmosphere) of the radio play scene bears only some relation to real-life soundscapes. Ferrington ⁹ 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'. He gives the example of a fire, with the fire siren, and secondly the shouting and chaos as the 'contextual sound', and thirdly, traffic and other urban noises as the final category in the background. This soundscape from real-life interaction mixes human voices and other sound events, some of whose sound sources are seen and some, the acousmatic, are not.

Before applying Ferrington's threefold model, I have to split off the dialogue component of radio drama and consider that separately. I want to concentrate here 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. And secondly, that 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 which operates by a much greater economy in sound events than, for example, the film sound track. Often the atmos is relegated only to the 'background field' behind the dialogue and establishes the location of the scene - examples being traffic, bar jukebox, sea shore and bird song.

3.2

Further, as opposed to 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. A final rule is that 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.

4.1

Signposting

Let me take up now Ferrington's first aspect of the live soundscape, the 'foreground sound ... which gets one's prompt attention'. 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 (their environment) 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 FAMILY EATING WITH CUTLERY ON PLATES. EMBARRASSMENT.

2. FATHER (clearing throat) This is a marvelous piece of beef, darling.

or

1. F/X JANE TYPING DESPERATELY AND SIGHING.

2. HUSBAND (entering) How's the book going, or dare I ask?

4.2

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, such as 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 to 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 by the BBC Optomod system.

A further note is needed on signposting. The location and acoustic of a scene is created even more by the character's voices as 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 [10](#). They also contribute by grunting, clearing their throats, and in breaths and out breaths, 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.

5.1

Radio drama's middle ground

Ferrington's second category is 'contextual sounds taking place in the vicinity of the foreground sound'. 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, mainly due 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 which are domestic and indoors, or in a car, and often many outdoor as well, 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 and positioning (or 'blocking') the actors within a narrow field, or secondly, 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. But space does not operate in radio drama as it does on-stage or 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.

5.2

There are examples where Ferrington's contextual sounds, or their fictional equivalent, usefully enter the middle ground. Here I am still restricting myself to F/Xs and atmos, and to what they bring into dialogue. There are creative touches which can add to the feeling and tension of a scene, and 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, giving the listener an aural 'sweep' over a dystopic urban landscape, and after 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 the vital revelation or into a tense pause. Even a phone ringing in a next-door office can give an edginess, or as a final example, crackle and static on a phone line, just as the lover's conversation enters an emotional difficulty. These are little peaks or intrusions from the background which serve to push the play tension up a notch and that 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 symbolic. In the selection of F/Xs for a radio play, there is regularly this over determination, so that the dog's barking or the phone ringing operates on more than one level at the same time.

6.1

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. gives a wide range: 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 yet 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, and then is brought under, and kept under.

Wreford Miller, in his masterful *Silence In The Contemporary Landscape*, uses the visual

metaphor of 'flatline' to define today's oppressive and repetitive machine sounds: 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. [11](#)

6.2

Radio drama atmos must avoid becoming a 'flatline sound' and so must contain enough 'discrete sound events, rhythm' (Miller) and irregularity to function. Hence items in the BBC catalogue offer that vital mixture of ingredients. It is over to production to give a skillful balancing in production and to allow the atmos to intrude in little peaks into that middle ground I described above. But in teaching 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. Atmos in a play can never become 'background field' (Ferrington).

There is an amusing BBC example of the overuse of a particular CD effect only last year. A woman farmer from Wales in the UK and a devoted radio listener, spotted a particularly distinctive cow F/X 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 confessed their overuse of a track from the BBC bovine effects CD, 'we have decided to send it to market'.

7.1

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 [12](#) observes of real-life interaction:

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

For the radio play audience, that selection has already been made by the director and playwright. I have sketched above the different ratio between figure and ground, where the middle is often missing. This does not deprive one of active listening and it is that quantity and quality of mental effort which the audience values.

8.1

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 [13](#). 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' [14](#). The contrapuntal model is the horizontal, where instruments and voices pursue relatively independent courses. One thinks of Bach's counterpoint, in chorales and sonatas.

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.

8.2

These two types of construction offer different choice relations in designing and balancing the radio scene. Both are tied of course to the ongoing chain of serial progression, to 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 reasons. Rarely, for example, are 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 [15](#).

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 of the sound events 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 the joins being noticed, whereas every visual cut in film immediately strikes us.

9.1

Space in the radio drama scene

Listening to radio plays before the mid-1970s, when stereo production properly became the norm in the BBC, 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.

10.1

Time in radio drama

Because radio dialogue rules above all, there is the imposition of a linear and 'real' time through the serial unfolding of the plot events. Character's talk imposes everyday time as the overall rhythm, a fictional 'talk-time', even in radio play modes which are non-realist. Of course abrupt transitions are often scripted, from scene to scene, but radio drama is mostly locked into the time-space continuum of real life. The rare exceptions are radio montage and short intercut segments of dialogue, usually in time-reversal dream within a character's mind. Film can leap in both time and location, as indeed radio can do too, 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 this 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 effect - 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.

NOTES

[1] Letters from a fond Uncle, no 11: Do we listen reasonably? by Sidney Moseley', Radio Times 3 February 1928.

[2] Ferrington 1994 in the section 'Aural Information'.

[3] Ferrington 1993 in the section 'The elements of audio design', 'An individual, attending a typical office party, can easily isolate relevant conversations from the constant din of background sound'. See also Crisell 1986p.48.

[4] Chion 1994, Foreword by Walter Murch, p.vii. See also Miller 1995 3c. Desire, compulsiveness, and the erotic ear, 'The ear is undoubtedly an erotic orifice'.

[5] Miller 1995 3b. New acoustic communities.

[6] Ferrington 1994 under the section 'Listening'.

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

[8] 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 was scenes from Shakespeare. 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 UK in 1995 amounted to 270.2 million UK pounds. I include radio ads here because many of them can be analyzed as 'mini-dramas'.

[9] Ferrington 1994 under the section 'The Soundscape'.

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

[11] Miller 1995 3b. Technology and development, new devices and sounds: 1: the industrial revolution

[12] Ferrington 1994 in the section 'Exploring figure ground relations'.

[13] Chion 1994 p.35 following.

[14] Chion 1994 pp.35-6.

[15] 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'.

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