

Gregory Whitehead: Anxiety is at the beginning and the end of radiophonic space, hardwired deep in the nervous system of the electronic media.

## RADIO SILENCE

A Conversation between Allen S. Weiss and Gregory Whitehead

Over the past twelve years, Gregory Whitehead has been exploring the multiple identities of radiophonic space. Live performance, taped documentary interviews, written texts, recyclings from other media, pristine nature recordings, phone banks, destroyed music, web debris, crossed circuits and pure noise have all figured into his dramaturgy, resulting in a hybrid form that he calls "The Forensic Theatre." Recent broadcasts have included *The Thing About Bugs* (1994), *Nothing But Fog* (1996) and *Bewitched, Bothered, Bewildered* (1998). Many of his shorter works are anthologized on a CD, *The Pleasure of Ruins* (staalplaat 059). Whitehead is also the author of numerous essays on subjects relating to language and the media, and the coeditor of *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-garde* (MIT Press, 1992), a selective history of the acoustic arts.

Allen S. Weiss has most recently published *Perverse Desire and the Ambiguous Icon* (SUNY, 1994); *Phantasmic Radio* (Duke, 1995); *Unnatural Horizons: Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1998). He has also edited *Experimental Sound & Radio* (The Drama Review 151, 1996) and *Taste, Nostalgia* (Lusitania Press, 1997). He teaches in the Departments of Performance Studies and Cinema Studies at New York University.

**Allen Weiss:** Whether on air or in writing, much of your work takes place within the strangely convoluted architecture of what you call the Forensic Theatre, a space for fractured bodies and shattered voices, a stage that fairly vibrates with anxiety, an anxiety about disappearance or dissolution into morbid anatomy, about the body in pieces, or even the fear of being buried alive. I came across a curious essay from 1834 by Fontanelle that enumerates the medical conditions that created a susceptibility to premature burial, i.e., moments of life-in-death: "The diseases in which a partial and momentary suspension of life most often manifests itself, are Asphyxia, Hysterics, Lethargy, Hypochondria, Convulsions, Syncope, Catalepsia, excessive loss of blood, Tetanus, Apoplexy, Epilepsy, and Ecstasy." It could almost serve as a program note for the Forensic Theatre.

**Gregory Whitehead:** No question about the anxiety, since anxiety is at the beginning and the end of radiophonic space, hardwired deep in the nervous system of the electronic media. At root, it's the anxiety of the Twitching Finger, the finger that taps out code on the telegraph, S-O-S, the anxiety of the finger that makes a distress call uncertain of its destination, or of the finger that pushes the button on the Emergency Broadcast System. But of course the ecstasy is there, too, the ecstasy that marks the other rhythm of the twitching finger, a finger fully prepared

to produce pleasure from a nobody; out of nothingness, yet ubiquitous. It's a finger that is hard to name, hard to attach even a hand or an arm to it. That's what makes the meanings of a radiophonic castaway so beautifully elusive, impossible to pin down, because you never know who is there, perhaps only a ventriloquist dummy, though hopefully one that knows how to celebrate those moments of life-in-death, like the corpse in a jazz funeral who suddenly jumps out of the coffin to announce the beginning of Mardi Gras.

**AW:** Commenting on the uncertain status of words in the face of an inescapable consciousness of death, Poe used the phrase "universe of vacancy." In mainstream media, to compensate for the infinite oblivion, everything is branded and named in huge letters. But in the Forensic Theatre, it's often a knee that is speaking, or a tissue slide, or something washed up on the beach, or a procession of anonymous voices that talk in peculiar, specialized dialects. And even though you are everywhere as the schizophrenic dramaturg, you are never named, and appear often only as breath and finger, or speaking in tongues, a pseudonymous polyphony that is often breaking up, fading out.

**GW:** Celebrity culture tries to provide the semblance of a common community where there is, in fact, Poe's



utterly infinite universe of vacancy. Individual inflection is cancelled – it's 'Be Like Mike,' or be a nobody. But embrace the nobody, give it lungs, a heart, a finger or two and a brain, and anything is possible, anything can happen or be said. Possibly, you even discover that there is more significance in a single blood sample than in a roomful of famous talking heads. The deeper question, though, is how to communicate the self? My maternal grandfather was a professional finger, a telegrapher for a news service, tapping out game summaries for the Boston Red Sox, of all painful fates. I once asked him if he signed his sessions in any way, if a finger could have a byline, and he told me no, but it was enough that the "ear" on the other end always knew who he was, just by the nuances of his stroke. That left a big impression on me. If you know how to listen, you know who is there, even if it's just a lonely nerve or a contentious memory.

**AW:** It's almost as if you wish to face a blank with a blank face – possibly the ultimate "radio face"!

**GW:** It is blank in a way, at least until the play begins – and that is my most concise definition of a radio play, the castaway that gives face to blankness.

**AW:** Returning to Poe for a moment, in so many of the tales, and possibly most of all in the entranced narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, Poe reveals the malleability and reversibility of death, all the while reveling in the morass of the metaphysics of decay. At times, Poe appears to offer something akin to a speculative philosophy of phonography and radiophony, well before their invention.

**GW:** It's astonishing. I have always thought of Poe as America's first radio artist, in theme, certainly, but also in style and in thought, the way so many narratives drop off into dark holes, and never really recover, or the characters who speak quite calmly and naturally and then the reader finds out they are posthumous, or the voices that drift in from other worlds, invisible and unnamed, or a character like M. Valdemar, who is mesmerized into a state of suspended animation, until finally dissolving into a puddle of loathsome, putrescence after declaring himself dead. All of which would be very much at home inside the Forensic Theatre.

**AW:** Or in *Shadow: A Parable*, where the narrator and six others take refuge from the plague in a castle. With "a sense of suffocation – anxiety," they revel, hysterically yet nervously, in the presence of the body of one of their dead comrades. Then, in a scenario worthy of the greatest avant-garde montage, the narrator listens to the echoes of his songs disappear into the draperies, from which emerges a shadow. And the shadow speaks to them, not with one recognizable voice, but rather, " ...the tones in the voice of the shadow were not the tones of any one being, but of a multitude of beings, and, varying in their cadences from syllable to syllable, fell duskily upon our ears in the well-remembered and familiar accents of many thousand departed friends." Could there be a more striking image of the infernal echo chamber of the electronic media?

**GW:** Pym's strange voyage takes the story even further, becoming almost a metaphysical tract on the subject of unreadability, not just the fine line between the living and the pile of corpses, but the even finer line between cipher and key, between lucid fact and dreadful nonsense. Pym was very much of a ghosted presence in my first major broadcast work, *Dead Letters*, which centered around extensive interviews with workers in the New York dead letter office. Poe understood that the journey towards figuring out where you are is bound to be precarious, above all when it involves the perpetual fog machine of human communications, the endless search for who is really speaking. Then you finally get there, and find out, and the next sentence the whole context caves in, or the rules change inside out. This is where Poe bleeds into Beckett: it's not that we live in a world void of meaning, that would in a way be too much comfort: it's that both world and meaning are always in motion, slipping away, changing forms and languages. And if we cannot refigure ourselves, well, then all is lost, and you end up rotting into a black puddle beneath the midnight sun, on a ghost ship, under full sail, full of meaning, perhaps, but heading nowhere, a cipher that cannot be delivered nor returned – a dead letter.

**AW:** That sense of a journey through thick fog, movement through a space whose final dimensions remain uncertain, is very much in the air in works like *Nothing But Fog* and *Bewitched, Bothered, Bewildered*. It reminds me a little bit of the experience of garden labyrinths, how necessary it is to surrender to them. If you enter with the fixed idea of reaching the center, of breaking the code, yes, you may get there, but you see nothing, in fact you miss the garden's entire cognitive architecture, since the labyrinth encodes knowledge that is not connected to the destination at all. Or perhaps there is even the transcendentalist echo of Thoreau, who celebrates "the wild fancies, which transcend the order of time and development," of a landscape "made out of Chaos and Old Night," but transplanted onto an electromagnetic terrain. Isn't such a position extremely anachronistic?

**GW:** True enough, but Chronos has long been the enemy of Chaos and Old Night, the world's first ultra-low-frequency radioheads, radiating from the dark, inside and out – in the meantime, the radioscape is full of disjointed utterances and interference, willful incoherence, like tangles of seaweed and fish bones washed up on the beach after a hurricane. Then somebody comes strolling along, gathers up a few tangles into an old cigar box, mumbles a few magic words, perhaps strokes a bone or two, and then spills the whole lot out again. Let the play begin!

**AW:** In one of your early essays, you refer to the language of radio as resembling the libidinal economy of a ménage-à-trois, and that sound is just something that happens along the way.



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**GW:** Radio art is too often conceived as some variation on an art of sound, which to me is a fundamental mistake, or at least a missed chance. Radio happens in sound, obviously, but sound is not the material, any more than images are the material of video art. In electronic media, the material is rooted in relationships: living and dead, present and removed, outcast and audience. The play, if it happens at all, is not among the sounds, but among these relations, whether thematic, conceptual, linguistic or even based in some form of circuit event, with telephones, the internet, or other radios. While sounds can be controlled, these underlying relationships are extremely unstable, and sometimes you just have to give in to what they want to do. So there is the wily spirit of the Trickster, perhaps, who has the humor to be both master and victim of the scene. Obviously, it's great if you have a bunch of cool sounds, but unless you can animate the other layers of relationships, nothing happens.

**AW:** The Trickster, and also the bug, in both senses: the bug that attaches itself to the digestive or internalization process of the host, and also the bug that disrupts the codes internal to a system.

**GW:** Yes, but it's not a bug that takes itself all too seriously, because the idea is not to disrupt so as to in some way destroy, even when the temptation may be very strong, but rather to dissemble in a way that reveals the critical nerves and bones, that lays bare the skewed intelligence of the system. Maybe not to suck the blood, but to provide a trace element, something that can be used as a reference time when it comes time to do the autopsy. Very often, something will happen in the wake of a broadcast that will put a whole new spin on the original idea, which is what makes autopsies so much fun.

**AW:** It would be a mistake to try to impose the idea of some unified corpus on your work, since it is so based in an aesthetic of dispersion, unleashing a corpus that digests itself and all progeny. Still, I am struck by the persistence of certain formal concerns in the midst of the discursive cacophony of themes and relations: there is the recurrence of structures that gradually experience a multi-generational decay, even when conscious of digital "immortality"; there is the persistence of a deadpan, almost bloodless, narrative voice that becomes entangled in language machines like ORAL OR ANAL LORA LO RANA ALOR AL ORAN; the elaboration of an elegant conceptual rhythm that gradually slips into chaos; or a voice, usually your own, that

is caught in a dreadful game, without exit. All asserting "the author's voice" in a way that ends up as a scrambled cipher, as if you are not the speaker, but just the mouth.

**GW:** "Dread" may be the key word, though there is something comic in the dreadfulness. Look at the wild world of contemporary communications: channels proliferate, microwaves rule, online communities flourish, beepers hang on every belt. The possibilities for contact are infinite, yet who is speaking? Maybe it's all a Borgesian Book Of Sand, that promises ubiquity and yet delivers oblivion, seizing the privacy of the individual as the broker's price. The self is scrambled, across all bandwidth. Communication happens, but in a way that appears random, in the chilly statistical sense. That's why late modernist ideas of chance, for example in Cage, sound so archaic, because in the meantime, the lines of code have stretched to eternity, threatening to turn every possible utterance into a prescription. That's where the dread starts to creep in, at the moment you think you are nothing but a blank, some alien voice, some snaking line of code, gets into your ear. Beckett was on to this in his last works, full of an unnameable buzzing, "all dead still but for the buzzing." The dread of thinking that you've been listening to a ventriloquist's dummy, then realizing that no, that is your voice. So you give a little nervous laugh, and try it out again. Who's there?

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