Radio Studies and Twentieth-Century Literature: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Remediation

Ian Whittington

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the history of radio studies as it intersects with twentieth-century literary studies, and outlines recent research trends in the field. Beginning with the earliest theorists and practitioners of radio (including Hilda Matheson, Rudolf Arnheim, and Lance Sieveking), the article considers how mid-twentieth century attitudes to radio as a medium of cultural expression varied among Marxist thinkers (Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht), sociologists (Paul Lazarsfeld and Hadley Cantril), and media theorists (Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong). The article then examines how two recent scholarly developments—the expanded conception of modernist culture under the name of the “new modernist studies,” and the growth of sound studies as an interdisciplinary field with both aesthetic and historical implications—have, since the mid-1990s, inaugurated a new wave of literary radio scholarship. These distinct but related developments have fostered newly integrated approaches to the study of radio as a medium that intersects not only with literature, but with other media; the article therefore provides a summary of recent works that approach radio through a lens of remediation (the mutual influence and interpenetration of various media), as well as
works that consider the aesthetic and ethical potential of the medium. The article closes by noting important avenues still to be explored, including questions of cultural hierarchy and “the middlebrow,” transnational broadcasting, and the cultural life of radio in the age of television and beyond.

**Introduction**

The continued growth of radio studies as an approach within literary studies has rendered obsolete the standard opening gambit in surveys of the field: the expression of dismay at the dearth of radio-related research and at the underuse of radio-related archives. No longer the “forgotten medium” that provided the subtitle to Edward Pease and Everette Dennis’s 1995 essay collection *Radio*, the wireless has secured its place in the constellation of media apparatuses that define technological modernity. Indeed, literary radio studies faces the enviable dilemma of all intellectual projects forged at the intersection of multiple disciplines: there are so many scholarly traditions from which to draw theoretical and methodological insight, and so many places to direct those insights, that the field belies its relatively recent emergence by extending out along multiple lines of inquiry, from social histories of American and British broadcasting and studies of individual writer-broadcasters to discussions of radio aesthetics and engagements with radio’s political valences at particular historical moments.

This article begins by surveying the history of radio studies in order to contextualize current scholarly production in literary radio studies. While the first waves of scholarship on literary broadcasting had engaged in a straightforward recuperation of supposedly lost or forgotten radio works, the cultural and materialist turn in the study of literary modernism, together with an increased interest in radio within the field of
communication studies, has provided literary scholars interested in the medium with a host of new perspectives on broadcasting as a culturally-embedded practice. In particular, recent research has turned productive attention to the role of radio in a larger, remediative ecology of mutually influencing technologies. Understanding radio as part of a larger network of modern media demands a bifurcated attention to both its particular aesthetic and formal qualities—its aurality, intimacy, and simultaneity—and the ways in which those qualities are in part defined by the media that radio is not. The radio public of the twentieth century was, for the most part, also a reading public and a film-going public, and their responses to the other media conditioned, and were conditioned by, their responses to radio.

While few recent works contend with questions of medium-specific forms and socio-technological contexts in equal measure, the two approaches are in fact complementary: in order to grasp the ways in which a medium conditions intersubjective and intermedial relations, one must first understand the particular aesthetic and rhetorical effects that medium makes possible. Conversely, contextual approaches provide a comprehensive view of the ways in which radio was implicated in larger political, ethical, and technological systems. This implication cuts multiple ways; as this article will argue in closing, the next step for literary radio studies will be to consider not just what literature learned from emergent media at the turn of the century, but how literature in turn shaped those emergent media. As literary radio studies continues to grow, in other words, it will need to consider not only what is properly “radiogenic,” and how those radiogenic qualities have affected literary production since the early twentieth century, but also how literary studies (itself the analysis of one element of a larger media system) might productively feed back into
media studies more generally. That a reconsideration of this feedback process is already underway holds promise for the continued and expanded study of a now thoroughly re-discovered medium.

**Radio’s First Waves**

Early analyses of radio remain vital touchstones for understanding how the first generation of audiences and practitioners conceived of the medium. A flurry of activity in the 1930s saw the publication of BBC Talks Director Hilda Matheson’s *Broadcasting* (1933), BBC producer Lance Sieveking’s *The Stuff of Radio* (1934), and German media theorist Rudolph Arnheim’s *Radio* (1936). These practitioners (and enthusiasts) were eager to explore what, exactly, made radio different from other media, beyond the simple notion of its status as a “blind” medium. Concepts that remain integral to the study of radio—including its instantaneity, simultaneity, intimacy of address, and homogenizing tendencies—emerge under various names, but in recognizable forms, in these works, and inform later analyses of radio aesthetics. As a new medium of mass communication, of course, radio compelled attention as much for its seemingly uncanny reach as for its formal mechanics. The 1940s saw the release of sociological studies by Paul Lazarsfeld, Theodor Adorno, Hadley Cantril, and others at the Princeton Radio Research Project (PRRP), founded in 1937; these studies treat the rise of radio as a sociological phenomenon remarkable for both its mass-persuasive perils and its political and economic potential. Cantril’s *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (1940), an analysis of the remarkable success of the Orson Welles-Howard Koch *War of the Worlds* broadcast (1938), documents the PRRP’s keen interest in any event that seemed to prove the power broadcasting wielded over its audience.
Lazarsfeld’s *Radio and the Printed Page* (1940) and *The People Look at Radio* (1948) soon followed, which aimed to give a neutral (though not wholly uncritical) assessment of the public’s relationship to a for-profit network system that was by then firmly established in America.

As a researcher affiliated with the PRRP from 1938 to 1941, Adorno serves as a transatlantic link between the sociological approach of the Princeton project and the variety of Marxist media critiques emerging from Frankfurt School thinkers including Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse and from independent critic-practitioners like Bertolt Brecht. For Adorno, Brecht, Marcuse, and Benjamin, radio’s embeddedness in existing political structures of power eclipsed its tantalizing potential as a medium of communication between broadcasters and listeners. “The crucial failing of this institution,” wrote Benjamin in “Reflections on Radio” (1931), “has been to perpetuate the fundamental separation between practitioners and the public, a separation that is at odds with its technological basis” (391). Implicitly contradicting the more sanguine assessments of Lazarsfeld and Cantril, Benjamin argues that this separation has left the public “quite helpless, quite inexpert in its critical reactions, and... more or less reduced to sabotage (switching off)” (391). While many recent critics (including Elena Razlogova, Alex Goody, and Kate Lacey) do not fully subscribe to the “strong containment” view that radio tends towards authoritarian applications, the radio critiques of the Frankfurt School remain valuable as sobering correctives to more enthusiastic accounts from the era.

The early variety of intellectual attitudes towards broadcasting to some extent reflects the particularities of the national broadcasting traditions amid which those attitudes emerged. Increasing totalitarian control of broadcasting in 1930s Germany, for
example, contributed strongly to pessimistic narratives of the squandered revolutionary potential of the medium. In the United States, on the other hand, the popular appeal of Golden Age commercial broadcasting represented the triumph of radio as a demotic medium, even if broadcasters seemed keen to compensate for this broad appeal by producing “serious” works under the auspices of programs like the Columbia Workshop and the Mercury Theatre of the Air (Verma 22-3). In the UK, the monopolistic BBC remained largely in the hands of the country’s cultural ruling classes until the 1950s (if not beyond), resulting in a medium torn between ideals of Arnoldian cultural prescriptivism and emergent popular demands for a more representative soundscape (Avery 11-31; K. Williams 25-36). Considerations of the aesthetics and effects of broadcasting from the 1930s and 1940s therefore highlight formal and political tensions inherent in the medium since its inception and which manifest themselves in the potential of radio alternately to enlighten or deceive its mass audience. Whether theorists and commentators heard in radio the threat of fascist manipulation, the satisfaction of popular tastes, or an ethos of cultural paternalism indicates the density of connections between political regimes, institutional structures, and programming decisions.

The end of the Second World War, and the consolidation of Communication Studies as a field in the 1960s, brought a change of perspective and another burst of scholarly activity related to radio. Landmark works of the mid- to late-twentieth century include Harold Innis’s *Empire and Communications* (1950) and *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964), R. Murray Schafer’s *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977/1994), and Walter Ong’s *Orality and
Literacy (1982). As against the more instrumental studies of practitioners like Arnheim, Matheson, and Sieveking, or the mass-culture analyses of the Princeton and Frankfurt School researchers, this later school turned to theorizing what Ong calls the “secondary orality” of the electronic media age (Ong 10-11), an orality which serves (in McLuhan’s phrase) to “retribalize mankind” around acoustic communities of language, nation, race, and ideology (Understanding Media 304). If the radio theory of the 1930s and 1940s concerns itself with the application and immediate effects of the medium, this next generation veers more sharply towards the ontological, hearing in radio (as in other media) a deterministic essence with the capability to transform relations between human beings and their world—the medium as message. While the aphoristic tendencies of McLuhan and the aural metaphysics of Ong are not universally endorsed in twenty-first-century media scholarship, their works remain foundational to any discussion of the relationship of radio to other media in the twentieth century. In particular, they presage a strand of technological determinism that resounds, however differently motivated and inflected, through later writings by Friedrich Kittler, Julian Murphet, and others.

Though at work during the rise of communications studies as a field, literary scholars writing about radio in the mid- and late-twentieth-century tended to focus on individual writers whose careers happened to intersect with radio, rather than on the medium’s specific effects. These early examples of literary radio studies often conceived of broadcasting as an alternate forum for written or dramatic expression rather than a substantively different cultural arena with an entirely unique set of formal possibilities. Thus, the studies on, or collections of, broadcasts by writers including Ezra Pound (Leonard Doob’s selection of Pound’s broadcasts, “Ezra Pound Speaking” [1978]),
Samuel Beckett (Clas Zilliacus’ *Beckett and Broadcasting* [1976] and Martin Esslin’s *Mediations: Essays on Beckett, Brecht, and the Media* [1980]), Louis MacNeice (Barbara Coulton’s *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* [1980] and Alan Heuser and Peter McDonald’s *Selected Plays* [1993]), and others that began to trickle out in the latter decades of the twentieth century tend to treat radio as a medium ancillary to literature. The inflection of these early works is textual rather than auditory, and the focus largely archival. In bringing the radio plays and talks of prominent broadcasters to the page, these collections re-animated literary broadcasting for subsequent generations of scholars and students; few of these collections and studies, however, grapple adequately with questions relating to broadcasts as auditory phenomena, such as the relationship of spoken words to sound effects and music, distinctions between accents and vocal registers, and larger contexts of radio production and reception.

There were exceptions to this textually focused trend: at least two significant studies of radio drama as a genre appeared in the final quarter of the century (John Drakakis’ *British Radio Drama* [1981] and Ian Rodger’s *Radio Drama* [1982]) which, while highlighting certain individual creators (and working largely in the British tradition), engaged fully with radio as a collaborative medium. Producers and composers (including Donald MacWhinnie, Lance Sieveking, and Lawrence Gilliam) receive in Drakakis’ and Rodger’s accounts a measure of prominence not often encountered in literary radio studies. Rather than treating broadcasting as a speaker-audience relation in which the mediating apparatus is occluded, Rodger and Drakakis acknowledge the extent to which technologies of radio production construct that relation. Drakakis, in particular, usefully provides a history and aesthetic definition of the British radio “feature,” a hybrid documentary-dramatic genre whose origins lie in
the tools and techniques of the studio, rather than the pen of the writer (Drakakis 8). While these radio-centric works provide some theorization of the aesthetics of the genre, however, their critical apparatus and scope have inevitably dated, and have only recently begun to be replaced by new approaches, most notably the “aesthetic turn” discussed later in this article.

Radio and the New Modernist Studies

Over the past twenty years, literary radio studies has entered a new phase of formal and theoretical sophistication. The surge in radio-related research within literature departments since the 1990s owes its existence to factors both external and internal to literary studies. The rise of the “new modernist studies,” connected to the foundation of the Modernist Studies Association in 1999, gave a name to an increasingly apparent cultural and materialist turn in the discipline of twentieth-century literary studies. This shift opened the traditionally narrow confines of “high modernism” to encompass a broader description of the experience of modernity, writ large. New modernist studies have expanded both the time frame of modernism and its assemblage of acceptable objects of study: the former to encompass a period stretching (roughly) from the 1860s to the 1960s, the latter ranging across media, scaling up and down hierarchies of cultural distinction, circulating among previously marginalized groups, and exhuming the cultural existences of nonhuman entities. As a popular medium of avant-garde potential, as a physical appliance that could be both disarmingly quotidian and spectacularly luxurious, and as a technology that often reproduced vocal markers of class, gender, race, and region, radio emerged as a medium that no properly “thick” description of the early- to mid-twentieth century culture could ignore. It did not hurt
the case for radio within this redefined modernity that, for roughly thirty years (1922-1953), it served as the preeminent electronic mass medium, an acoustic interface between wielders of discourse and listeners—however complicated that binary model may in fact turn out to be.

The first sign that literary scholars were treating radio with a new theoretical rigor came with the publication of Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead’s edited collection _Wireless Imagination_ (1992). By pairing critical essays with primary documents, this volume offers a rich introduction to the connections between radio and the literary and artistic avant-garde of Europe from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam in the 1880s to Antonin Artaud in the 1940s, via Marcel Duchamp and F.T. Marinetti. Essay collections edited by Adalaide Morris (_Sound States_ [1997]) and Charles Bernstein (_Close Listening_ [1998]) further strengthened the case that radio had altered modernist poetics through its separation of sounds from their sources; words written and spoken could now never not be *things*. This was art made in the context of “sound once removed” (Kahn, “Histories” 1); the removal of a stable origin for sounds by technologies of sonic inscription and diffusion could not help but deepen the sense of subjective and linguistic fragmentation at the root of much avant-garde art.

More recent works on radio and literary studies extends from this avant-garde focus to include writers not normally considered “high modernist”. The most noteworthy essay collection in recent years, _Broadcasting Modernism_ (2009; ed. Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty), offers an impressively wide-ranging survey of the field. Difficult to summarize adequately because of its breadth, _Broadcasting Modernism_ offers a variety of points of entry to the study of radio broadcasting and the literature of the early twentieth century; while it offers close listenings of the broadcasts
of Desmond MacCarthy (by Todd Avery), T.S. Eliot (Michael Coyle), Edna St. Vincent Millay (Lesley Wheeler), Samuel Beckett (Steven Connor), and others, many of its essays venture formulations of the radiogenic attributes of modernism and modernity more generally. In “Wireless Ego: The Pulp Physics of Psychoanalysis,” for instance, Jeffrey Sconce builds on his work in *Haunted Media* (2000) in order to examine the “occult braiding of radio, telepathy, and psychoanalysis” in the early years of broadcasting (32). As Sconce shows, these three modes of “otherworldly” communication were woven together in the public consciousness as seemingly supernatural forms of projecting thought across a distance. Cohen’s “Annexing the Oracular Voice,” meanwhile, examines the ways in which writers including Cecil Day-Lewis and Rex Warner remediated some of the properties of radio by interrogating (sometimes by seeking to emulate) the discourse of vocal authority that the medium had claimed for itself by the 1930s.

In addition to their work with *Broadcasting Modernism*, Cohen and Coyle have individually made significant contributions to literary radio studies. Coyle has published extensively on T.S. Eliot’s radio broadcasts, repositioning the supposed arch-modernist as a public intellectual who used the BBC’s domestic, European, and Overseas services to engage in mass-mediated redefinitions of culture at a variety of scales. Cohen, meanwhile, has focused on questions of intermediality and the role of the BBC as one prominent institution within an increasingly technologized British public sphere. Cohen maintains that, rather than a monolithic and siloed medium, radio in Britain was in constant dialogue and friction with media forms including not just poetry and the novel (“Annexing the Oracular Voice”) but the periodical press, through its magazine *The Listener* (“Intermediality and the Problem of *The Listener*”). Cohen’s work successfully mobilizes theories of the mutual influence and interpenetration of media—as
championed by Julian Murphet and others, and discussed in more detail later in this essay—towards an understanding of how radio and other media alternately compete and conspire to craft individual, regional, and national subjectivities.

**Radio Studies and the Aesthetic Turn**

In its combination of archival recovery, close listening, and intermedial analysis, Cohen’s work positions itself effectively at the intersection of radio’s aesthetics and its social and technological contexts. The value of such work, which balances an ear for listening with an attention to the larger media landscape, is belied by its relative rarity; though new modernist approaches to radio studies have strengthened and complicated the engagement of literary scholars with radio studies, there remains a certain hesitation among many to deal with questions of auditory form. A significant new turn in radio studies, however, seeks to offer a more concrete vocabulary for addressing the formal and aesthetic patterns particular to broadcasting. New books by Seán Street and Neil Verma remedy the old textual emphasis of radio studies by offering new conceptual categories and vocabularies for the experience of radio art. Street’s *The Poetry of Radio: The Colour of Sound* (2013) is a sweeping, if uneven, attempt to theorize “the poetry of the vernacular,” which he locates “not only in human speech, but in the sounds of other species, and the very breath and movement of the planet itself” (xii). In his wide-ranging survey, Street explores the affinities between radio art and poetry, notably the possibilities afforded to each by such devices as intentional silence, popular forms like the ballad, and the storytelling possibilities of the radio “feature”. While Street’s command of the history of the medium, and his access to interviews and personal correspondence, make for an entertaining and illuminating work, the work tends to
trade in terms that remain impressionistic rather than clearly defined. Its stated project of exploring the concept of the auditory vernacular thus remains unfulfilled.

More successful is Verma’s *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama*. Through a study of over 6000 unique broadcasts drawn from over 160 programs, Verma offers an account of the rise, evolution, and diminution of a way of listening (and of directing listening) that accompanied the dramas of the Golden Age of American radio from the 1930s to the 1950s. Verma’s premise is that, as radio dramatists and broadcasters responded to a series of political, technical, and cultural developments, their radio dramas shifted from a focus on creating plays that generate an aural evocation of space and time—a theatre *in* the mind—to a focus on creating plays about processes and problems of cognition itself—a theatre *of* the mind. Self-reflexively aware of their chosen medium, these dramatists created dramas that address, often directly, a sense of the interconnectedness of mind and medium, sense and signal, cognition and transmission.

The combination of vast scope and close listening in *Theater of the Mind* affords conclusions that range from the highly localized to the highly generalizable. Through specific interpretations of the Golden Age broadcasts of Archibald MacLeish, Norman Corwin, and others, Verma offers an important new vocabulary for the wider field of radio studies. “Audioposition” refers to the point of audition created for the listener by dialogue, auditory cues, and other compositional codes (35); “intimate style” refers to a technique in which the listener’s audioposition is connected to that of a particular character or set of characters, which results in differential patterns of information and empathy based on distance from the listener’s constructed audioposition (58-9); “kaleidosonic style,” on the other hand, is characterized by “a shifting sonic world that is
accessed through a central point that is itself static and removed from events” (68). Kaleidosonic scenes or programs focus on events unfolding in time, and lack the spatial depth constructed through intimate style; they “sound shallow but are broad and highly public” (68). The usefulness of these aesthetic terms lies in their elaboration from practice, not pure theory; while drawn from a particular national tradition, they are conceptually broad enough to be applied with success to a variety of program types and broadcasting traditions. One hopes that scholars, armed with a specific formal vocabulary with which to describe the spatial effects of radio, will generate new interpretations of, for example, the radio dramas of Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter, and Bertolt Brecht, or the radio features of D.G. Bridson, Louis MacNeice, and Lance Sieveking.

Verma’s work can be heard as the first major statement of an incipient “aesthetic turn” in radio studies. In a post on the Antenna blog in February of 2013, Shawn VanCour called for renewed attention to the formal aspects of radio broadcasting, which would include “analysis of narrative structure and broadcast genres, methods of spatial and temporal representation, styles of vocal performance, and experiential qualities of radio listening” (“New Directions in Media Studies: The Aesthetic Turn”). VanCour—whose own research concerns the establishment of aesthetic norms in early radio—specifically calls for a “production-oriented” approach to radio aesthetics (and media aesthetics more generally) that would emphasize the “craft practices” of the studio floor over the institutional practices of the boardroom (“New Directions”). In the fall of 2013, in the wake of VanCour’s brief essay, Antenna launched a series of essays on “The Aesthetic Turn” across a range of media; while it remains to be seen in what new directions this turn pushes the study of radio and related media, Verma’s book
represents the rewards attendant on a focused approach to the formal properties of the medium.

**Audiences, Publics, and Ethics**

This aesthetic turn, with its potential to revitalize the analysis of literary radio production, represents just one aspect of the deepened engagement of modernist literary studies with the burgeoning array of radio-related scholarship within communication studies since the 1990s. Renewed attention to radio from within communication studies has refined discussions of the institutions, effects, and affects of broadcasting as a social practice. Two landmark works in sound studies, Emily Thompson’s *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2002) and Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003), have provided contemporary radio studies with a sense of the deep and often messy history of auditory technologies: while Thompson focuses on relations between sound reproduction and acoustical architecture in America from 1900-1933, Sterne examines the cultural history of listening practices that predate the proliferation of sound reproduction technologies circa 1900. While both writers have influenced contemporary radio studies by foregrounding the material and cultural contexts within which twentieth-century acoustic culture unfolded, Sterne’s focused challenge to many unexamined assumptions about our relationship to sound and to sonic technologies has had a particularly strong impact on the field.

Within radio studies itself, Michele Hilmes (in *Radio Voices* [1997] and *Network Nations* [2011]) and Susan Douglas (*Inventing American Radio* [1989] and *Listening In* [1999]) have pioneered the study of American radio broadcasting beyond simple institutional histories by incorporating a more social, human-scaled analysis of what
radio meant to American listeners across a variety of gendered, racialized, and class communities. Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff accomplished similar projects in the British context, most notably in their *Social History of British Broadcasting 1922-1939* (1991) and Scannell’s *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (1996). These large-canvas historical studies have recently been supplemented by more specific histories, many of which approach the transnational emphasis of much current work in the new modernist studies vein: Thomas Hajkowski’s *The BBC and National Identity, 1922-1953* (2010), Simon Potter’s *Broadcasting Empire* (2012), and Hilmes’ *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (2012). Collectively, these works have turned the attention away from the institutions that enabled broadcasting, and directed it towards the communities those institutions were designed to serve.

The increased focus on communities of radio listeners—also known as radio publics—offers one of the most promising avenues for future developments in radio studies. Much work has already been done: Jason Loviglio’s *Radio’s Intimate Public* (2005) examines the processes of public-formation that underlie the success of landmark American programs including Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats,” citizen participation programs like “Vox Pop,” and popular thrillers including “The Shadow.” Elena Razlogova’s *The Listener’s Voice* (2012) seeks to reconstruct the patterns through which listeners contributed to the formation of the “moral media economy” of radio by communicating their opinions about programming, advertising, and technological developments (3-5); in doing so, Razlogova succeeds at dismantling any overly simplistic analysis of radio as a purely top-down medium, depicting it instead as a medium which functioned along nuanced networks of feedback from listeners to
producers. Kate Lacey’s *Listening Publics* (2013) advances a similarly ethically inflected approach to audience studies, although her focus is on a more generalized experience of listening during radio’s early decades rather than specific channels of feedback and influence. Noting that the proliferation of acoustic technologies that distanced voices from speaking bodies coincided with increasingly philosophical pressures on the stability and integrity of the subject, Lacey posits listening as a condition of “radical openness”: a stance of receptivity that demands a decentered understanding of our position within a network of communication (8-9). For Lacey, this state of openness is “fundamentally ethical” in that it is intersubjective, as it places listeners in relation to both broadcasters and fellow listeners (14).

Within literary studies, attending to the ethics of radio diffusion means considering both the social processes of its production and reception as much as questions about the writerly intention that lies behind any given broadcast. Though he addresses both aspects of the medium in *Radio Modernism* (2006), Todd Avery lends special attention to the relationships British modernist writers sought to forge with the broader listening public. Radio represented, for writers working within the Arnoldian and Christian framework of founding BBC Director General Sir John Reith, an “irrefutable technocultural fact” that provided “a great communications opportunity to impact ethical discourse either in support of or in opposition to the BBC’s moral mission” (30). Far from being wholly dominated by Reith’s influence, the BBC of the 1920s and 1930s provided a forum in which writers elaborated heterogeneous moral and aesthetic philosophies, from T.S. Eliot’s “deontic evangelicalism” to the “immanent ethical aestheticism” of Bloomsbury Group writers like E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Desmond MacCarthy (139). Indeed, a willingness to intervene in the public sphere
via the wireless marks a frontier between literary modernism and the “radio modernism” of Avery’s title: citing the example of H.G. Wells, a prominent writer and broadcaster but far from a high modernist, Avery notes that radio blurred cultural communities of high-, low-, and middlebrow. In the wake of mass broadcast media, modernism could no longer claim a position of aesthetic or ethical autonomy. “Literary modernism,” he writes, “is as inseparable from radio as are both modernism and radio from the realm of the ethical” (143). Literary radio broadcasting engendered a close attention to the ethical ramifications of aesthetic practices and cultural hierarchies; its prominent place in mid-twentieth century British life should therefore prompt a reconsideration of the categories by which we evaluate the cultural output of a turbulent historical moment.

**Intermediality, Convergence, and Differentiation**

Put another way, however, radio didn’t so much change modernists’ minds about their audiences as it changed the mass medium of literature itself. Julian Murphet, in *Multimedia Modernism: Anglo-American Literature and the Avant-Garde* (2009) proceeds from the presumption that modernist media were mutually determining; rather than treating literature as a medium that only flirted with the new media that emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century, Murphet argues, scholars should treat literature as a medium that found itself—that is, discovered its material specificity—only when confronted by the presence of newer technologies of communications. As literary modernism sought to adjust itself to a redrawn map of media relations, it enacted a compensatory emphasis on literary form as a means of distinguishing itself in the crowded and increasingly convergent cultural field of film,
print, gramophones, and radio (21-2). For Murphet, once the age of mechanical reproducibility was breached, all media began to show the effects of their convergence with other media through a similar emphasis on form: “convergent differentiation transforms the terrain of art into media production” (30). The formal obsessions of modernism—in its visual, plastic, performative, musical, literary, and architectural manifestations—represent not the conscious practice of a small number of artists, but “a structural adjustment within a given social and historical media ecology” (10).

While Murphet’s view of modernist form as symptom of media friction may represent a Kittlerian, post-human extreme in the study of literature and technology, he is far from alone. Many modernist scholars have begun to treat literature and broadcasting—not to mention other media—as sites of mutual inscription and influence. Alex Goody, in Technology, Literature, and Culture (2011), frames literature as a “transcription” of the relationship between humans and machines. “Literature,” she writes, “is firmly inserted into the machinic interconnections of a technological world of production, destruction, replication, malfunction, communication, transmission and reception” (2). Literature could not help but be changed by its interface with radio and other media. For writers, radio provided not just a new medium, but also “a way of understanding and creating an audience and an idea of culture and ethics” (Goody 64). The social effects of the remediative model here become clear: radio transforms writers’ sense of their relation with their audiences, both literary and auditory. By enabling certain patterns of information flow, it enables certain patterns of social and cultural relations.

Part of the effect of intermedial overlap lay in the competitiveness that arose between older literary and artistic systems and their mechanical successors; learning to
be a medium meant learning to propagandize on your own behalf. Mark Wollaeger’s
*Modernism, Media, and Propaganda* (2006) takes the affinities between modernism and propaganda as the starting point for his analysis of writerly involvement in political persuasion; both forms of communication represent ways of ordering a crowded and disorienting field of signification (xiii). For broadcasters like George Orwell and H.G. Wells, and for documentarians like Humphrey Jennings, participation in late-modernist information culture required a vexed engagement with media of mass persuasion that might otherwise be controlled by more politically instrumental interests (219). Mark Goble, in *Beautiful Circuits* (2010), extends the thesis of modernism’s emergence from a competitive media ecology into the realm of writerly pleasure, detecting in the work of Henry James, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott FitzGerald and others an almost erotic fascination with both the compensatory medium-specificity Murphet identifies and the possibility of thematizing the competing media of communication and reproduction (14-15). Though Goody, Wollaeger, and Goble approach remediation from a diversity of angles—and, it should be noted, do not all treat radio with the same depth of focus—they share a common interest in “the media” as a system that functions according to a logic not entirely apparent to, or under the full control of, its human users.

If there is a shortcoming in this emphasis on media as a network of mutually influencing technologies, it is in the tendency to downplay the roles played by human systems in shaping and regulating those technologies. Technologies concretize repeated and repeatable actions, whereas media apply and adapt those technologies according to a variety of demands and practices that are, at root, social. Media are, in Lisa Gitelman’s phrase, “socially realized structures of communication” (*Always Already New* 7). While most of Gitelman’s work concerns the phonograph and related technologies of
reproduction (rather than transmission), her interest in the formation of media publics is relevant to the development of radio as a mass medium. Gitelman’s deeply social approach recognizes that while any given technology affords a limited array of potential applications, that limited array does not negate the role of human communities participating in a shared experience of representation and communication. David Trotter, in *Literature in the First Media Age* (2013), offers one example of the extension of Gitelman’s model into the field of literary study. Rather than horizontal competition between media, Trotter identifies a “vertical” antagonism built around how each medium performs a social and economic function, which in turn articulates an aesthetic and political principle or value (7). The meanings afforded by radio and literature are as much about their connection to larger cultural systems as they are about particular information flows. This kind of soft determinism challenges scholars to pay close attention to the line separating technological contexts from technological coercion; if technologies delimit the range of possible human actions, they do not remove all forms of individual and collective agency.

**New Directions in Radio Studies: Transnationalism, the Middlebrow, and the Question of Archival Access**

The larger project for literary radio studies in the future, then, is to listen closely to the formal particularities of its auditory medium while addressing the pressures attendant on that medium by proximate systems that are both technological and socio-political. An understanding of the interactions between media depends, however, on an understanding of the particularities of literature as one of those media; with that in mind, literary radio studies should work to retain a sense of what literary scholarship
offers to media studies more generally. This includes an understanding of how patterns of cultural influence operate in geographical and hierarchical terms. Very little work has been done, for example to analyze radio’s engagement with middlebrow writers of the twentieth century. The wartime broadcasts of J.B. Priestley represent a prominent exception; John Baxendale, Patrick Deer, and Robert Calder have all contributed insightful analyses of his prominent role in British culture of the Second World War. Kate Whitehead and Humphrey Carpenter, meanwhile, have approached the cultural hierarchies of broadcasting through their histories of the highbrow BBC Third Programme. On the whole, however, analysis of the intersections of broadcasting and literary production have not sufficiently addressed the ways in which cultural distinctions derived from the world of letters mapped themselves onto an entirely other medium. These distinctions are even more pointed in terms of the access of working class writers to the medium; in Britain in particular, but also elsewhere, these questions of access hinge as much on the acoustics of class difference as on literary style.¹¹

Much more could also be done to draw attention to broadcasts by writers beyond the Anglo-American canon.¹³ Peter Kalliney’s *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (2013) devotes a large part of its analysis to the role played by the BBC in fostering mutually beneficial connections between Caribbean and British modernist writers.¹⁴ Even within Anglophone literary traditions, however, investigations remain to be written on literary broadcasting originating from India, Australia, Canada, or any of the English-speaking nations of Africa. The confines of an Anglo-American definition of literary modernism have for too long been painfully apparent; radio, as a medium inherently disrespectful of national boundaries, is a well-positioned site from which scholars might take up the
banner of global modernism(s). The heavy emphasis of this article on British, American, and to a lesser extent German broadcast culture is evidence enough that there remain large gaps in the transnational map of radio studies.

Literary radio studies could also extend the ethical approaches signaled by Kate Lacey, Todd Avery, and others. The proliferation of voices on the airwaves—especially as restrictions eased with regard to which voices were “appropriate” for broadcasting—represents an ethical imperative to attend more closely to the heterogeneous publics radio was designed to serve. If this newly dense soundscape challenged listeners and broadcasters to consider the voices and ears of those who shared their mediated community, the cumulative historical emergencies of the 1930s-1960s could only amplify this ethical challenge. How did writers and broadcasters respond to the newly audible crises of the Second World War, the Holocaust, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Cold War? How did literature and radio intersect during the U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s? By pursuing the intersections of historical crisis and cultural production, scholars might determine whether, and to what extent, writers used radio to establish new forms of ethical care in the postwar world.

Moving the locus of radio studies deeper into the mid-century would resolve another notable absence within the field. Very little radio scholarship has emerged to treat the literary soundscapes of the 1950s and afterward; what of postmodern playwrights and novelists? A small number of works have attempted to map the intersections of radio and literature in the latter half of the century: Elissa Guralnick’s *Sight Unseen* (1996) treats the radio plays of Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, and Tom Stoppard; in novelistic territory, Justin St. Clair’s *Sound and Aural Media in Postmodern Literature* (2013) devotes a chapter to representations of the radio in Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and
other American postmodernists. Again, there is much fertile ground to be tilled. Radio studies could profitably extend itself chronologically as much as it could geographically; the ascendancy of television by the mid-1950s, though decisive, did not rob radio of all cultural currency. Internationally, the Cold War brought with it an entirely new radio soundscape of espionage, propaganda, and conspiracy; on a national scale, communities of listening in America, the UK, and beyond continued to shift and grow as urbanization, immigration, and counter-cultural movements took hold. Radio studies needs to make a more thorough assessment of what broadcasting meant to literature—and vice versa—throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

Finally, for all of the growth in literary radio studies since the 1990s, the field faces significant limitations in terms of access to archival recordings and scripts. If the field is to move beyond the purview of a specialized group of researchers, a far greater proportion of archived programs must be made available to scholars, students, and the general public. While the BBC has been generous in opening its written archives for research, and has made some radio material available through recordings (including broadcasts or plays by H.G. Wells, Samuel Beckett, and Tom Stoppard), a great deal remains unreleased, accessible only through in-person listening at the British Library in London. Similarly, the audio archives of American broadcasters including Archibald MacLeish and Norman Corwin are either not currently available, or available only through online, “grey market” channels. Significant foundational work must be done to bring these documents to a wider audience, whether through the publication of scripts, the release of audio recordings, or through newer, digital models of archival presentation that combine audio and textual information. Increasing access to the radio output of earlier decades will allow students and researchers to understand not only the
aesthetic properties of the medium itself, but also the ways in which radio took up the practices of other media with which it shared an ecology, and the ways in which its own practices were taken up in turn. Radio’s rediscovery as a medium central to the experience of modernity only heightens the need for closer listening.

Bibliography


Whittington 30


*Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* Ed. Pamela L. Caughie.


Fleay, C. and M.L. Sanders. “Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC.” 


Griffith, Glyne. “‘This is London Calling the West Indies’: the BBC’s Caribbean Voices.” 


The term “literary radio studies” is used throughout this essay to designate research at the intersection of traditional literary studies and radio studies. The term is helpful in distinguishing such research within a broad field of radio scholarship that ranges from institutional histories and reception studies to the science and technology behind the apparatus of radio itself. The term “literary radio studies” also aims to clear a space for the study of radio and literature beyond the conventional focal point of “modernism,” and to extend the reach of literary radio studies into the late twentieth century and beyond.

Debra Rae Cohen provides a useful starting point discussions of the radiogenic as a historically contingent category that ranges from the aesthetic to the discursive; that is, from a concern with sound as a building block of artistic production to a concern with how that sound can structure power. To use her example, the radiogenic encompasses both the sonic fixations of a novel like Finnegans Wake and the “oracular power” of a medium that lent writers new modes of imagining patterns of dissemination and cultural authority (Cohen, “Annexing the Oracular Voice,” 143, 154). Kate Lacey, in Listening Publics, offers an in-depth discussion of the radiogenic in relation to early German broadcasting. She argues that while the radiogenic can be taken simply as that which is in some way suited to radio, in its most “pure” form the radiogenic represents a break with direct signification through the non-mimetic use of sound (93-4). Through such sonic experiments, Lacey argues, the medium offers listeners and practitioners not just new aesthetic forms but new modes of perception (94).

David Jenemann and Robert Hullot-Kentor provide useful analyses of the substantial friction, here glossed over, which emerged between Adorno’s concerns and those of other Princeton researchers.

In addition to Jenemann and Hullot-Kentor, see Birdsall, Ch.1-2, for an overview of the role of radio in everyday life in Weimar and Nazi Germany.

See Jonathan Sterne’s critique of the “audiovisual litany,” an Ong-influenced trope in media studies in which vision is aligned with distance, space, and objectivity while hearing is aligned with immersion, time, and subjectivity; this conception of the auditory as “pure interiority” has, in Sterne’s view, hobbled sound studies by connecting it to a tradition of Christian theology relating to voice, spirit, and salvation (Audible Past 14-19).

See Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s introduction to *Bad Modernism* and their follow-up article “The New Modernist Studies” for useful overviews of this disciplinary shift.

As indices of this increased prominence, two radio journals (*The Radio Journal* and *The Journal of Radio and Audio Media*) are currently in publication, and two scholarly blogs (*Sounding Out!*, a sound studies blog, and *Antenna*, maintained by the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin—Madison) devote an increasing amount of space and attention to radio studies. The Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) also formally recognized radio studies as a Scholarly Interest Group at the 2013 SCMS conference in Chicago, Illinois.

Keith Williams, in *British Writers and the Media, 1930-1945*, provides some commentary on the relationship between social class and media participation in Britain.

Anke Birkenmeier’s work on Alejo Carpentier and Paul Deharme, Jeffrey Mehlmann’s extended essay on Walter Benjamin’s broadcasts for children, and Daniel Gilfillan’s study of German experimental radio represent notable exceptions to this Anglocentric trend.

Kalliney here joins Laurence Breiner, Glyne Griffiths, and others in mining the rich history of broadcasts by writers including Una Marson, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, and George Lamming.