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Bertolt Brecht

RADIO AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION: A TALK OF THE FUNCTION OF RADIO

(Germany, 1930)

Our social order, which is an anarchic one — if one can imagine its anarchy of orders, that is to say a mechanical and uncorrelated confusion of complexes of public life, which are in themselves highly organised — our social order, which is anarchic in this sense, makes it possible for inventions to be made and developed which must first conquer a market, demonstrate their reason for existing: in short, inventions which have not been commissioned. Thus at a certain point in time technology was far enough advanced to produce radio while society was not sufficiently advanced to take it up. It was not the public that waited for radio but radio that waited for a public; to define the situation of radio more accurately, raw material was not waiting for methods of production based on social needs but means of production were looking anxiously for raw material. *It was suddenly possible to say everything to everybody but, thinking about it, there was nothing to say.* And who was 'everybody'? To begin with, the answer was not to think about it. One looked around to discover where something was being said to someone and attempted to muscle in purely and simply as a competitor and to say no matter what to no matter whom. That was radio in its first phase as a substitute. As a substitute for the theatre, for the opera, for concerts, for lectures, for café music, for the local columns of the press and so on.

From the beginning radio imitated almost all the existing institutions that had anything to do with the diffusion of whatever could be spoken or sung. The result was an inescapable profusion and confusion in the tower of Babel. In this acoustic department store you could learn in English how to keep chickens to the Pilgrim's Chorus from *Tannhäuser*; and the lesson was as cheap as tap-water. This was the golden childhood of our patient. I do not know whether it is over set or not, but if it is, then this youngster, who did not have to produce any qualifications in order to be born, will at least have to look around later on for an *aim in life*. In the same way it is only in riper years, when they have lost their innocence, that people ask

themselves why really they are on this earth.

As far as radio's aim in life is concerned, it cannot in my opinion consist in merely embellishing public life. It is not merely that it has shown little aptitude for doing so; unfortunately our public life also shows little aptitude for being embellished. I have nothing against sets being installed in shelters for the unemployed and in prisons (it is obviously thought that in this way the life-span of these institutions can be cheaply prolonged) but it cannot be the chief task of radio to install receivers underneath the arches even if it is a nice gesture to provide those who wish to spend their nights there with the minimum: namely, a performance of *The Mastersingers*. This is a case where tact is needed. Nor does radio, in my opinion, suffice as a method of making the home cosy and family life possible again so we can cheerfully leave aside the question whether what it cannot achieve is in any case desirable. But quite apart from its dubious function (to offer a lot is to offer no one anything), radio is one-sided when it should have two sides. It is a pure instrument of distribution; it merely hands things out.

And now to be positive, that is to say, to turn to the positive side of radio, here is a proposal to give radio a new function: Radio should be converted from a distribution system to a communication system. Radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable, a gigantic system of channels — could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making the listener not only hear but also speak, not of isolating him but of connecting him. This means that radio would have to give up being a purveyor and organise the listener as purveyor. That is why it is extremely positive when radio attempts to give public affairs a truly public nature. Our government needs the activities of radio as much as the legal system does. Whenever the government or the legal system oppose such activity on the part of radio then they are afraid and adapted only to the days before the invention of radio — if not before the invention of gun-powder. I have no more ideas than you have of, say, the duties of the Prime Minister; it is the job of radio to make them clear to me; but it is one of the duties of the highest official in the state to report to the nation by means of radio on his actions and the reasons for them. The task of radio is not exhausted, however, by the relaying of these reports. It must, in addition, organise the demand for reports — that is to say, transform the reports of our rulers into answers to the questions of the ruled. Radio must make this exchange possible. It alone can organise the great discussion between industry and consumers about the standardisation of objects of daily use, the debates over the rise in the price of bread, the disputes in local government. If you should think this is utopian then I would ask you to consider why it is utopian.

But whatever radio undertakes it must endeavour to combat that *inconsequentiality* which makes nearly all our public institutions so laughable.

We have an inconsequential literature, which not only takes pains to have no consequences itself but goes to a great deal of trouble to neutralise its readers by picturing all objects and situations without

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Poster, "The Voice of Liberty In the German Night at Radio Frequency 29.8" by John Heartfield (Published in

Die Volks-Illustrierte, II, 16, 21 April 1937).

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their consequences. We have inconsequential educational institutions, which go to great lengths to transmit an education devoid of consequences and itself the consequence of nothing. All those of our institutions which shape ideology see it as their main purpose to ensure that the role of ideology is without consequences in accordance with a concept of culture which considers that the development of culture is already finished and that culture does not require a continued creative effort. This is not the place to examine in whose interest it is that these institutions are inconsequential; but when a technical invention so well adapted by nature to decisive social functions encounters such anxious attempts to keep it inconsequential and concerned with the most innocuous entertainment, then the irrepressible question presents itself whether there is no possibility of confronting the excluding powers with an organisation of the excluded. The slightest move in this direction would inevitably have a natural success which would far exceed the success of all the programmes of a culinary character. Every campaign which has clear consequences, that is to say, every campaign which really intervenes in reality, even at points of very modest importance, for instance the making available of public buildings, would ensure for radio an incomparably more far-reaching effect and a totally different social importance than its present purely decorative role. The technique for all such projects has still to be developed; but it will be directed towards the prime task of ensuring that the public is not only taught but must also itself teach.

It is one of radio's formal duties to give these didactic projects an interesting character — to make interests interesting. One area, the area aimed at young people in particular, can even be treated in artistic terms. This attempt on the part of radio to shape didactic material artistically would correspond to those efforts on the part of modern art which aim to give art a didactic function.

At the Baden-Baden Music Festival of 1929 I explained 'Ocean Flight' as an example of possible exercises of this kind, which use radio as a means of communication. This is one model for a new application of your apparatus, another model could be *The Badener Lehrstück on Understanding*. In this case the pedagogic part, taken by the 'listener' is that of the air-crew and that of the crowd. It communicates with the parts of the trained choir, of the clown and of the announcer contributed by the radio. I am deliberately limiting myself to a discussion of principles because the confusion in the realm of aesthetics is not the reason for the unparalleled confusion in the realm of principle but merely its result. The mistaken view — a very useful mistake for some — of the true function of radio cannot be corrected by aesthetic insights. Let me put it this way — the application of our theoretical knowledge of modern dramatic methods, namely of epic theatre, to the field of radio might produce extraordinarily fruitful results.

Nothing is more inappropriate than the old-fashioned opera, which is based on the inducing of a state of intoxication, for what it finds in front of the set is the individual — and of all alcoholic excesses none is more dangerous than solitary drinking.

Even the old-fashioned drama of the Shakespearean school is almost unusable on radio, for it is an isolated individual and not a crowd in close contact in front of the set that is led to invest feelings, sympathies and hopes in plots which have only one aim — to give the dramatic individual a chance to express himself.

Epic theatre, because it is made up of separate numbers, because of its separation of elements — the separation of image and word and of words and music — but particularly because of its didactic attitude, could provide a great number of practical hints for radio. But their purely aesthetic application would only lead to a new fashion and we have plenty of old fashions as it is. Were there a theatre of epic drama of didactic documentary performance, then radio could carry out an entirely new kind of propaganda for the theatre, namely genuine information, indispensable information. A commentary of this kind, closely bound up with the theatre, a genuine, worthy complement to drama, could develop entirely new forms and so on. Direct collaboration between performances in the theatre and on the radio could also be organised. Radio could transmit choruses to the theatre just as it could broadcast publicly the decisions and productions of the audiences at the meeting-like collective performances of didactic plays.

I shall not elaborate on this 'etc' and deliberately do not deal with the possibilities of separating opera from drama or both from the radio play or of solving similar aesthetic questions, although I know that you perhaps expect that of me, since what you aim to do is to sell art through your sets. But in order to be saleable art today has first of all to be buyable. And I preferred not to sell you anything — only to formulate the proposal in principle that radio should be made into a means of communication for public life. This is something new — a proposal which seems utopian and which I myself describe as utopian when I say 'radio could' or 'the theatre could'; I know that the great institutions cannot do everything that they might do nor everything that they want to do. They want to be supplied by us, reinvigorated, kept alive by innovations.

But it is no task of ours to renew ideological institutes by innovations on the basis of the present social system; rather our task is to move its basis through our innovation. So we are for innovations but against renewal! By continuous, unceasing proposals for the better employment of the apparatus in the interest of the community we must destroy the social basis of that apparatus and question their use in the interest of the few.

These proposals cannot be achieved in this social system — can be achieved in another; yet they are merely a natural consequence of technological development and of the propagation and formation of that other social system.

Welle 29,8

Fotomontage: John Heffernan