Artaud and the Serialization of Radio

Wolfgang Hagen

With the following remarks, I might seem to be distancing myself somewhat from the multi-media production and distribution problems of radio art in the new millennium. But a return to the radio art world of 1948 could serve to compensate, in view of the fact that we will concern ourselves here with a radio programme which was never broadcast at all. It simply didn't take place. Shortly before it was scheduled to go on the air, it was cancelled by the station management. And nevertheless, this "unbroadcast" radio art programme had an unparalleled influence on the subsequent development in Europe. The programme I am referring to is **Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu (1947) - Pièce radiophonique by Antonin Artaud**, English title: **To Have Done with the Judgment of God**.

I.

"L'homme est malade parce qu'il est mal construit.

Il faut se décider à le mettre à nu pour lui gratter cet animalcule qui le démange mortellement, dieu,

et avec dieu ses organes.

Car liez-moi si vous voulez,

mais il n'y a rien de plus inutile qu'un organe.

Lorsque vous lui aurez fait un corps sans organes, alors vous l'aurez délivré de tous ses automatismes et rendu à sa véritable liberté.

Alors vous lui réapprendrez à danser à l'envers comme dans le délire des bals musette

et cet envers sera son véritable endroit."[1]

I have quoted this passage here not only because I believe that a lecture on radio art should begin with an example of radio art, but also because this radiophonic work already answers one of our most important questions. The question is: Must radio art necessarily be played on the radio in order to be radio art? The answer provided us by Artaud's "To Have Done" is: No, not necessarily.

It is important only that this work was commissioned by and produced for radio. Quite in contradiction to a (superficial) understanding of his theory of theatre, Artaud had insisted that his work be previously produced. And it was: In November 1947, in the course of seven days in the studios of Radio France, Artaud produced his forty-minute work on vinyl, rewriting it several times in the process. Even the final audio version still differs from the script version. No, in this case Artaud by no means performs live. Although he states in his theory of theatre:

A “verbal utterance never [possesses] the same value a second time, for a verbal utterance does not live two lives. […] All words, once they have been uttered, are dead.”[2]

These are the words of Artaud, of all people, who uses his own voice to record a radio programme which will never be broadcast within his lifetime. Artaud’s radio words are definitely dead words in the sense of Artaud’s definition. What is more, his radio work is about the precise circumstances of their death. What does Artaud demand in the end? A “body without organs,” or, to put it differently: An organ without a body. In other words: the separation of the voice from its corporeality, of semantics from its phonetics, of the graphemes from their scene. The separation of the voice from the body is precisely what the technical reality of radio has always done. Not only spatially (because the listener does not perceive the body of the speaker) but also, at the same time, temporally (the body of the speaker could already be dead when his speech is heard).

This idea comprises yet another reference to the question of radio art. I am referring here to the live event in front of the microphone (still an absolute prerequisite for Richard Kolb and the radio theory of the 1920s and ’30s[3]) and with it to the obedient consonance of the listener’s empathy with a voice. For Artaud, the apologist of an absolute theatre of immediacy, it does not apply to radio. Artaud works with recording devices – phonograph records.

As a result, the station director of the time is able to listen to the piece before its airing. He does so and decides: Monsieur Artaud’s work – a series of obscene, anti-American, anti-Catholic, profoundly indecent, offensive, unintelligible monologues interspersed with all manner of shouts and screeches – will not be broadcast by his station. Fernand Pouey, the faithful editor, resigns in response. But first, on February 5, 1948, he invites fifty writers, musicians and journalists, among them Raymond Queneau, Jean Cocteau, René Clair, Paul Eluard, Maurice Nadeau and René Char, to a private presentation of the work. Their enthusiasm is unanimous, but still the director refuses to back down. A second presentation follows in a theatre in Paris. Again it meets with wide approval. Artaud dies in early March as a consequence of his years of confinement in psychiatric institutes under wartime conditions. By the end of the year, his piece has been printed in various editions, in part and in whole, variously reviewed and interpreted, but not broadcast. The first broadcast does not take place until the early 1970s. There are presumably few never-aired radio programmes which have nevertheless had such a widespread and intensive effect as this radio work by Antonin Artaud, his very last work. Artaud rehearses, records, rejects, edits out, re-records, reassembles: What emerges is a radical studio production. At the end, Artaud says, I became a musician.[4]

II.

As far as the history of radio art is concerned, both technically and, in a sense, spatially this work marks the transition to the next and most enduring epoch of European radio art, namely Pierre Schaeffer's *Musique Concrète*. Artaud's work is a revolutionary one by virtue of his method of handling the material of the sound carrier. For Pierre Schaeffer, this working principle serves as a point of departure for a new definition of music. On this basis, the most productive epoch in the history of European radio art gets under way. And its artistic successors, including such major figures as Pierre Henry, still determine our radio art programmes to a major extent today.

As is well known, it was in precisely that spring of 1948 that Pierre Schaeffer and his technician Jacques Poullin were working with phonographic disc recorders and players in the studios of the RTF (Radiodiffusion-télévision française, Paris) to collect a new universe of original sounds referred to as "Concrete Music." No longer an abstract score, but the compilation of concrete sounds was henceforth to form the basis of music. On October 5, 1948, the first radio broadcast of a **Concert of Noises** followed, consisting of the famous sounds of tin pans and piano strings. A half a dozen record players were distributed around the room, playing recorded noises in endless loops at varying speeds. They were accompanied by a twenty-three-year-old pupil of Olivier Messiaen, a young man by the name of Pierre Boulez, on a specially prepared grand piano.[5]

The artistic influence of Artaud's works on the young Pierre Boulez is well known. The following is only one of the latter's many early statements:

"I am not qualified to thoroughly investigate Artaud's language, but I can find in his writings the fundamental preoccupations of current music; having heard him read his own texts, accompanying them with screams, noises, rhythms, he showed us how to achieve a fusion of sound and word, how to splash out the phoneme when the word no longer can, in short, how to organize delirium. What nonsense and what an absurd alliance of terms, you'll say! Would you believe only in the vertigo of improvisation and the powers of an "elementary" sacralization? More and more, I imagine that to effectively create this we must consider delirium and, yes, organize it."[6]

In the spring of 1949, Merce Cunningham and John Cage come to Paris and make the acquaintance of Pierre Boulez and *Musique Concrète*. Cage and Boulez begin their critical-productive collaboration, which is to last five years. The radio-art bridge between Europe and the U.S. has been spanned. Cage takes Boulez' Piano Sonata No. 2 back to the States with him; the score drives David Tudor, his pianist, to desperation until he reads Boulez' remarks on Artaud. The work becomes playable for him. As a result, Cage himself reads Artaud, namely **The Theatre and Its Double** in French, triggering the reception of Artaud in the U.S. The years 1951 and '52 are known to be the most important for Cage, marking his initial employment of the randomness of **I Ching**, followed by **Imaginary Landscape No. 4** for

twelve radios in which the young La Monte Young participates, the work **4'33"** likewise with David Tudor, and the famous **Williams Mix**, a piece strongly reflecting *Musique Concrète*. The influence of the early European development of the 1950s on American Audio Art or Sound Art (or whatever its correct designation might be) is clearly discernible.

The far-reaching effect of *Musique Concrète* can hardly be overestimated. Hansjörg Schnitthenner, for example, head of the radio play department of Radio Bavaria for many years, but also a large number of other dramatic directors from German radio play departments, visited the Parisian **Club d'Essay** and took knowledge of multi-track productions and original-tone collaging back to their offices with them. Without *Musique Concrète*, the productive 'O-tone years' of the Neues Hörspiel from 1968 to the mid 1970s are hardly conceivable, for example Mauricio Kagel's **Aufnahmezustand**, the horizontal and vertical collages in Ferdinand Kriwet's **One Two Two**, complete with sound speeches and general pauses, or the experimentation in Ludwig Harig's **Staatsbegräbnis** or Paul Pörtner's **Alea**, to name just the most significant pioneering works.[7]

But let us return to Artaud's epochal radiophonic work of 1948, with which – I would like to propose – the radio art of the European post-war modern age begins. In his **Theater of Cruelty**, Artaud demands the uniqueness of immediate, direct expression. Then, in his **To Have Done with the Judgment of God**, he agrees to a pre-produced, reproducible work which appears to contradict all the directives of his theatre postulates. Nevertheless his contradictional setting works out, in the madly delirious but nevertheless cleverly rhythmic monologue of ecstasy that results, where he is crying for a body without organs, by which he means nothing other than the cry for an organ without a body, a bodiless voice. [stimmt der Satz so?]

For, as we have seen, all words – once uttered – are dead. And radio is their medium. There is no better definition. Radio is the medium beyond the judgement of God, the place where the dead words are all to be found, the place whence the lost voices bellow out at us. Ten years ago, in a work on the radio artist Gregory Whitehead, the American media philosopher Allen Weiss accordingly summed up the approach of modern radio art as follows: "Radiophonic art is guided by the serendipity of a fata morgana, the bewildering, aleatory process of recuperating and rechanneling the lost voice."[8] But that description takes only the one aspect into account, as Joe Milutis quite aptly pointed out a few years ago in an essay on the radiophonic ontology of the modern avant-garde:

[In radio art ?]"That is, in the one ear, we have the poststructuralist scenario (inaugurated by the scenographemes of Artaud), in which meaning progresses noisily, without stable referent, as one word cannot double or replicate another in intent, force, meaning, or effect. Yet, in the other ear, in its struggle to rechannel loss, the art of radiophony attempts to circuit language back to some original, predictable, even replicable source in the living human body, even though this circuit is formed by chance operations in an illusory referential system."[9]

In my view, the radiophonic art of the post-war modern era, from Artaud to such artists as Akizugo Maibajachi, producer of mobile sound lenses, can hardly be more concisely described than by this ontological dilemma. The radio tears the voice from corporeality, and it is radiophonic art that aspires to build a sound bridge to the unfathomable grave of the dead signs, in the knowledge that reality can never be represented by the medium.

III.

Here I would like to turn our attention to serialization and, in the process, to American radio. The reader will justifiably demand to be enlightened as to what is meant by the serialization of radio: Already quite soon after its beginnings in 1920, American radio develops a dominant programme pattern, namely the daily, or sometimes only weekly "serial." This form consisted of programmes, shows, the most varied types of radio plays, comedies, vaudeville skits, etc., broadcast as series every day at the same time and on the same station. Forms such as these were not adopted by European radio until after the war; Radio Weimar, for example, did not offer a single serial. Between 1920 and 1950, American radio produced six thousand of them, each with hundreds, often thousands of individual episodes. It all began with **Amos 'n' Andy**, which was on the air from 1925 until well into the 1950s. Two black men are played by two white men, a so-called "blackface gag." The four thousand episodes recount the migration of the African Americans from the southern to the northern states. Beginning in the mid 1950s, the serials disappear from radio and wander into television. It is by way of television that they come to us. We know them today as the "daily soaps."

Radio wasn't invented once, but, if the reader will allow the expression, twice. Once in Europe, once in the U.S. In Europe as an absolutist official measure, crowded into one station, armed with a cultural mission decreed by the state, and directed to stay clear of politics and current social affairs. In the U.S. as a consequence of a popular amateur radio movement, which by 1919 had already grown to such proportions that the Navy and Congress could no longer bring it to a halt. In Europe, radio calls and the listener must listen. In the U.S., initially, radio calls radio. According to the "Radio Act" of 1912, there is no one radio addressing everyone. Instead, a license for a radio is only granted if it calls another radio. Radio speaks with the calling code KDKA, for example, and radio answers with the calling code KNX. The latter, KNX, is the Hollywood station on which John Cage makes his radio debut with his weekly boy scouts programme. KDKA is the first, the radio belonging to the amateur Frank Conrad of Pittsburgh, with which everything officially began.

Radio calls radio on a certain frequency. It is thus that radio begins in the U.S. – i.e. in organized chaos. All seven hundred broadcasting stations which have a license in 1925 actually broadcast on a single frequency. And they are also supposed to listen – for example for distress signals from ships in the coastal waters. And to other stations. Beginning in 1925, the stations in Chicago – numbering about twenty at the time – set up their famous "silent

night.” On a particular evening, they are all silent so as to be able to pick up the stations in the nearby surrounding regions.

It is 1925. In the U.S., radio has taken the form of corporative American radio amateurism, according to which hundreds of stations have to coordinate with one another on a single frequency. In Germany, radio is an institution based on civil obedience and protected by the threat of punishment: An emergency regulation introduced by Ebert allows the police to enter a private home unannounced in order to investigate any manipulations carried out on the radio apparatus. For, as in America, any tube radio can be transformed into a broadcasting device with effortless ease. Brecht knew that from the Weimar workers’ radio movement, and the U.S. radio movement had known it and practiced it – i.e. broadcast and received – since 1912.

The serialization of the programme, then, is merely a consequence of the structure of a radio call – entirely unpolitical in nature, it should be pointed out – calling not the listener but another radio. It results from the fact that, in the U.S., radio had in reality always represented a large number of stations, unlike in Germany and Europe, where a mixed programme was crowded onto one station and overseen by undemocratic control boards. It was the multi-station structure of U.S. radio that led to serialization. In the U.S., radio exists only in the plural. And due to the fact that a programme, a show, can only make claim to one small slot on the time axis, that slot can establish itself only by means of self-similar repetition as a recognizable programme. The series is born. In its infancy it takes on the form of the so-called “Song ’n‘ Pattern” era of early American radio, predating the first serials. The American radio play does not consist in the European conclusiveness of a one-time work. It is always part of a series. Even Orson Welles’ famous radio play **The War of the Worlds** was part of a series, namely the seventeenth episode of the **Mercury Theatre On the Air**. All of the episodes were staged according to the pattern of a ‘programme formula’ – the so-called “first-person-singular” principle – with Orson Welles as the narrator and the voice of the main character.

In recent years, Susan Douglas and Michelle Hilmes[10] have investigated the function of the voice in American serials. They have devoted particular attention to the ventriloquistic vocal structure of the serial heroes, who make use of eccentric, exaggerated, vocal slapstick-like distortions apparently as a means of enabling the oscillating alteration of vocal identification. In the Land of Immigrants, everyone has to learn a new voice, namely one’s own voice in a foreign language. These million-fold changes of voice in the multi-national melting pot are strongly reflected by the ‘ventriloquism’ of American serial heroes, a ‘speaking-in-other-tongues’ ventriloquism represented paradigmatically by the otherwise inconceivable success of the radio ventriloquist as embodied by Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy in the late 1930s.

I have examined these circumstances more thoroughly in other contexts than is possible here: The enormous polyphony of American radio’s three-decade-long serial era is

associated with a number of success factors. The most important appears to be the strategy of addressing the listener's desire for vocal oscillation, founded in identification not with a single voice but with the consistent differentness of the radio voice which, no matter how masterfully it is ventriloquistically articulated, sounds like nothing other than the distortion one's own voice undergoes in a foreign language.[11] Douglas and Hilmes, whose investigations are inspired by the cultural studies approach, thus arrive at the postulation that the serial era of U.S. radio may have contributed greatly to the integration of the nation during the Great Depression, an aspect which, however, is of merely marginal interest to us here.

What I find more important, to progress a step further towards my conclusion, is that the serialization of American radio not only quite closely approximates the vocal dilemma triggered by European radio art, but also operates, so to speak, with the structural mechanism of that dilemma. The subsequent era of the DJs, who dominated U.S. radio in the 1950s and '60s, picks up on all of these aspects of the simulation and dissimulation of the ventriloquistic radio voice. The totemism of a DJ like Wolfman Jack, for example, is not a far cry from the scenographematically cascading screams of Artaud. Yet, even more significantly, another aspect is reinforced here: Nothing in American radio is *one* programme or *one* piece. Listening to the radio is a serial operation. The entire programme is oriented towards seriality, towards iterative, self-similar, fractal forms. A DJ doesn't have just one show but can be looked forward to on a daily basis. The act of listening to the radio operates dilatorily in a blend of postponement and anticipation. From the formal-structural point of view, this practice leads in the early 1970s to so-called format radio. Now not only one show, one voice, but the entire station and its entire programme are the aural object of a vocal desire, into which the voices have progressively withdrawn since then. Format radio leaves it to the schematism of a previously unheard-of expansion of pop music to satisfy all expectations and dissimulative identifications. Format radio simulates radio which can only be listened to through the simulative dissolution of its simulations.

After the liberalization of German radio in 1985, the American dual monopoly of the music and radio industries descended upon us in a single concentrated sweep, resulting in the circumstance that, of Germany's 330 radio stations, there is hardly one that is not 'formatted.' Of all the dilatory and anticipatory vocal expectations which characterized both the era of serialization and the early formatting phase of American radio, nothing has remained here in Germany but the self-similarity of the obtuse pop schematism already described with great precision by Adorno as early as 1941. Today, eighty percent of radio serves to amplify the pop-music consumer milieu. This characterization applies to the mass medium in the U.S. and in Germany to equal degrees.

Finally, the question arises as to whether radio art can react to the dominance of the medium's serialization, to the forms so successfully imported from the U.S. for employing radio dilatorily/anticipatorily as an aural object.

Some interesting ideas have been introduced. “There is no pop radio play, but there is radio-play pop,” says Herbert Kapfer, head of the radio play department at Radio Bavaria, for example. And his words are illustrated by the works of Andreas Ammer, FM-Einheit and Susanne Amatosero. Ammer remarks: “The idea of pop certainly had a greater influence on me than the idea of the artist. What we do is not to take something from the world and use it to document how bad the world is, but rather to take something from the world and put it an entirely different place.”[12]

Repetition, the iteration of the world of dead words in an unexpectedly different place – that is an essentially Artaudian operation. Radio art continues to have a great future in this serial differentiation.

[1] Man is sick because he is poorly constructed. / The decision must be made to expose him in order to scratch out that microscopic pest that itches him to death – God, that is, and with God his organs. / So tie me up if you want to / But there is nothing less useful than an organ. / When you have made man a body without organs, then you will have liberated him from all of his automatisms as well, and given him his true freedom back. / And then you will teach him to dance the other way round, as in the delirium of a *bal musette*. / And this verso will be his true recto [translation by Judith Rosenthal]. Antonin Artaud: **Schluss mit dem Gottesgericht**. – Munich, 1980, pp. 14f.

[2] Antonin Artaud: **Das Theater und sein Double**, - Frankfurt/Main, 1969, p. 123.

[3] Wolfgang Hagen: **Das Radio**. – Munich, 2005, pp. 113 ff.

[4] Quoted in: Allen S. Weiss: **Phantasmic Radio**. – Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 25.

[5] Ibid., p. 27.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Pörtner, Paul: **Die menschliche Stimme**. Three-part series broadcast by the NDR in 1974. Cf. also Ingo Kottkamp: **Stimmen im Neuen Hörspiel**. – Münster, 2001.

[8] Quoted in: Allen Weiss: **Experimental Sound & Radio**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001, p. 57.

[9] Joe Milutis: "Radiophonic Ontologies and the Avantgarde". In: Ibid., p. 68.

[10] Susan Douglas: “Listening”. In: **Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern**. - New York: Random House, 1999. Michelles Hilmes: **Radio Voices, American Broadcasting 1922-1952**. - Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

[11] Cf. Op. cit. 3, pp. 226 ff.

[12] Herbert Kapfer: **Vom Sendespiel zur Medienkunst. Die Geschichte des Hörspiels im Bayerischen Rundfunk**. – Munich, 1999, pp. 158 f. (Translation from the German by J. Rosenthal.)