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Inner Ears and Distant Worlds: Podcast Dramaturgy and the *Theatre of the Mind*

Farokh Soltani

Radio Drama and Audio Dramaturgy

In 1999, five whole years before the word *podcast* was even invented,[1] Tim Crook (1999: 22–29) opened his book on radio drama with a history of audio-drama, divided into six ages, in which he charts the beginning of the form not with the advent of radio, but from an indeterminate point in the ancient past; indeed, it is not until the fourth age that radio communication makes an appearance. The point of this rather counter-intuitive history is that sound drama is not limited to radio broadcasting, and that the terms *audio-drama* and *radio drama* are not intrinsically interchangeable. Currently, according to Crook, we are in the 'sixth age' (Crook 1999: 26) of audio-drama, when the internet's ability to act as a sonic medium has opened entirely new avenues of making, distributing and listening to audio-drama. Podcasting, as a technological means of maintaining and mediating a direct connection between the creators and the audience, is perhaps the key transformative development of this new age, as it detaches drama from the economic, institutional, and political requirements of radio broadcast. Technically, any enthusiast in possession of a small set of resources—an idea for a drama, a personal computer, some actors (or a good voice changer software) and a decent microphone, which is currently available on any smartphone—has the

F. Soltani (✉)
Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, London, UK
e-mail: Farokh.Soltani-Shirazi@cssd.ac.uk

potential to access a rapidly expanding pool of listeners. In the UK, the number of podcast listeners increased by over 44 per cent between 2016 and 2017, from 3.8 million (RAJAR 2016) to 5.5 million (RAJAR 2017), while the proportion of Americans who listen to podcasts has increased from 11 per cent in 2006 to 40 per cent in 2017—an estimated 112 million potential audience members (Edison Research 2017). Drama podcasts have increased in number—enough for Neil Verma to explore 43 of them in his aesthetic survey (Verma 2017a: 2)—and in prominence: Gimlet Media's *Homecoming* (2017), for example, featured the talents of A-listers Catherine Keener and David Schwimmer. Two decades into this sixth age of audio-drama, the form has found a new home. Yet, one can ask, is the dramaturgy of sound drama also making itself at home? How are the practices, techniques, and aesthetics of previous ages changing to exploit the possibilities of new digital cultures and tools? Beyond extending its reach for both producer and audience, what is podcasting doing to audio-drama? In this chapter, I want to argue that the increasing prevalence of podcast drama provides an opportunity not just for making audio-drama more diverse and far-reaching, but an opening for a reconceptualisation of what it is to create drama with sound alone, which breaks from the radiophonic models of previous ages. I posit, however, that taking this opportunity first requires a radical rethinking of the philosophical framework through which the function of audio-drama is comprehended. In short, my goal is to show that by understanding the podcast in its own terms, can we move toward an audio-dramaturgy that looks beyond the boundaries of *radio* dramaturgy.

I should admit outright that claims of a complete rethinking of audio-drama are nothing new. Indeed, Verma observes that 'over the past half-century, the only thing more reliable than the constant revival of radio drama is the insistence that what ensues is not really a revival, but something utterly new, instead' (Verma 2017b: 5). Verma's survey of the recent uptick in podcast drama examines the developments of this new so-called-revival, asking the very question driving this chapter: 'What would the new audio-drama actually sound like?' (Verma 2017a: 5). He notes that unlike other dramatic artforms, radio has no canon to look back upon, and that 'the most prominent voices [in the field] describe radio drama in ways that seeks to distance it from audio-drama' (Verma 2017b: 5); the latter, instead, appears to look to film and television as a model. Highlighting parallels between radio dramaturgy and the aesthetic and textual features of podcast drama, Verma argues that in its move forward, audio-drama should in fact 'leave TV and film behind and 'come home' to radio drama' (Verma 2017b: 10). This sense of continuity, also echoed by Andrew Bottomley (2015) in his examination of

the *Welcome to the Night Vale* podcast, could be considered an inevitability: after all, radio drama's defining feature is that it creates drama through sound alone, and this necessitates a particular approach to the form's aesthetics and practices. As podcasts share this feature, it is only natural that they look back to radio history, the site of the majority of experiments in audio-drama, where the distinctive principles of non-visual dramaturgy have developed through years of trial and error. Should one follow this logic, the pursuit I have outlined above is unnecessary: radio dramaturgy *is* the boundary of audio-drama. Hence, as Verma points out, attempts to break with the heritage of radio drama are eventually bound to repeat it.

In the next few sections, I want to unpick and critique the assumption that the unisensory nature of audio-drama is the determining defining factor of radio dramaturgy, and the subsequent conclusion that radio drama is a suitable blueprint or paradigm for podcast drama. I posit that the principles of radio practice instead emerge out of the particular modes of listening afforded by the medium of radio. Therefore podcasting, which offers a completely different manner of listening experience, requires its own mode of dramaturgy. I support this claim in two ways. Firstly, I critique theoretical accounts of the function of audio-drama—characterised by the term *the theatre of the mind*—and draw attention both to their influence on the practices of radio dramaturgy, and to their assumptions about dramatic experience. Secondly, I draw from the philosophical discipline of phenomenology to explore the listener's encounter with radio and podcast sound, positing that the two are radically different where dramaturgy is concerned. Through this, I hope to show that the path of audio-drama can diverge from, rather than follow, the radio past.

Audio Dramaturgy and the Theatre of the Mind

Let us begin with a clear working definition of audio-dramaturgy. According to Aristotle, a poem is *drama* if it is mimetic—that is, if it presents the 'characters as living and moving before us' (Aristotle 1898: 13). As Keir Elam elaborates, the mimetic mode provides its audience with an opening into 'a fictional dramatic world' (2005: 87); such worlds are 'presented to the [audience] as 'hypothetically actual' constructs, since they are ['perceived'] in progress 'here and now' without narratorial mediation' (2005: 98). Subsequently, we can understand dramaturgy, literally meaning 'putting into dramatic form' (Luckhurst 2006: 5) as the process through which a potential fictional world is actualised for an audience through specific methods of presentation and mediation. In this sense, dramaturgy does not deal with what happens in the

dramatic world, but concerns, in the case of theatre, 'external elements relating to staging, the overall artistic concept behind the staging, the politics of performance, and the calculated manipulation of audience response' (Luckhurst 2006: 10). Audio-dramaturgy then, is the praxis that turns a fiction into a dramatic presentation in sonic form, to be experienced as the 'here and now' of a world by a listener: the practices and processes that construct and configure the sound structure, the technologies involved in its creation, aesthetic paradigms, hypotheses about the audience's response, and so on. The distinctive nature of audio-drama reveals itself within this very definition: a crucial aspect of the experience of the world, vision, is absent from the toolkit of audio-dramaturgy. Audio does not have direct recourse to the sense of sight, and much of our experience of real and dramatic worlds is visible, but inaudible. This quality of the medium of sound, whether labelled *blind, invisible, imaginative* or *dark*—following Andrew Crisell, Martin Shingler, Tim Crook and Alan Beck, respectively—requires the audio-dramaturg to take specific steps to make the dramatic world tangible for the listener by other means, regardless of the medium of distribution.

It is a common trope to describe the means of audio-dramaturgy in terms of its appeal to the mind, rather than the eye, of the listener. In theoretical discussions of audio-drama—which, one should note, almost all concern *radio*—one particular label is applied often: *the theatre of the mind*. Marin Esslin articulates the term clearly in *The Mind as a Stage* (1971):

> [The radio] play comes to life in the listener's own imagination, so the *stage* on which it is performed *is the listener's own mind.* He himself, by having to provide the visual component, which is undeniably present in any true dramatic experience transmitted by radio, is an active collaborator with the producer. (Esslin 1971: 7)

Andrew Dubber calls the term a 'useful cliché, repeated by practitioners and radio educators alike' (2013: 101). Indeed, the idea that radio drama occurs in the listener's mind is rather ubiquitous in the discourse around the artform: John Drakakis describes the listener creating 'mental pictures' (1981: 20). Crook argues that radio creates a multi-sensory 'imaginative spectacle' (1999: 64) for the listener. Crisell posits that the listener uses the sonic codes of radio to create a 'mental picture' (1994: 8). *Theatre of the mind* is more than a simple metaphor for the effects of radio drama on the listener; it implies a particular relationship between the drama and the radio listener—one in which the experience of the dramatic world is achieved not through the immediate, concrete channel of vision and space, but through the listener's mental activity and

intention. Where theories of radio drama differ is on the mechanism through which the listener constructs the *theatre of the mind*. Crisell favours 'transcodification' (1994: 146) as an explanation, arguing that radio drama works by presenting the listener with an array of auditory codes and signs, replacing visible but inaudible elements of the dramatic world, that she interprets in order to reconstruct the world through mental representation. Beck sees the process as similar to cognitive mapping—'the sort of mental activity that one uses in travelling to a friend's house, having an internal picture of the route' (2000: 3.1), allows the listener to gain an abstract knowledge of the dramatic world. Esslin (1971) and Martin Shingler (in Shingler and Wieringa 1998) cite the power of sounds in evoking memories and images as the foundation of the *theatre of the mind*. These proposed explanations all lead more or less to the same conclusion: that the sounds of radio drama work to activate the listener's engagement, so that she can turn her mind into a theatre to contain the dramatic world. The prevalent theories of audio-drama, in other words, understand the listener's experience as intellectual and imaginary.

A look at the conventions of audio-dramaturgy in its most common form, radio drama, reveals how the sounds of drama are structured to address the mind. The briefest survey of practitioner accounts and educational guides shows that the emphasis in radio dramaturgy is on creating clear, meaningful sounds to replace the visual aspects of the world for the listener's mind. The spoken word becomes the most important dramaturgical element on the radio, providing a sonic stand-in for what is inaudible but should be seen; indeed, there exists a strong consensus among theorists and practitioners that radio is fundamentally dependent on speech (see Drakakis 1981: 6; Rodger 1982: 10; Crisell 1994: 6; Shingler and Wieringa 1998: 6; Crook 1999: 54; McInerney 2001: 4; Pownall 2011: 20). To avoid ambiguity in the process of mental interpretation, sound effects are drawn from a recognisable lexicon of 'not what is real, but what is understandable' (McLeish 2012: 259), and signposted with speech for more clarity. Musical elements, too, can be used in place of visuals by indicating mood, passage of time, or transition between scenes (McLeish 2012: 261). The practical process of producing this sonic construct, too, is geared toward the listener's mind. Due to the importance of speech, radio is frequently labelled a 'writer's medium' (Lewis 1981: 6; Drakakis 1981: 58; Willett 2013: 200; Hill 2015: 44; Smethurst 2016: 80); after all, if words are the key to the listener's mind, then the script contains a blueprint of all the information necessary for the reconstruction of the dramatic world. The process of producing the sound effects, whether background atmosphere or spot effects, is guided by the script, and is a 'search for clear associations between situation and sound' (McLeish 2012: 259). Frequently,

this means resorting to conventional sounds that 'radio [producers] over the years have developed […] with generally understood meanings' (McLeish 2012: 259). A sound structure thus produced is clear and meaningful enough to convey the dramatic world to the listener. Of course, with direct access to the mind also comes an expansion of the boundaries of possibilities in this world: after all, the dramatic world is not limited to what can be seen or recreated on a stage or on film, and bound only by what is imaginable. Addressing the mind rather than sight provides the audio-dramaturg ultimate control over the flow of the listener's awareness of space, time, positions, objects, identities, and other aspects that would be immediately manifest were she to experience the dramatic world visually. The modification and manipulation of the mind of the listener vastly expands the dramaturgical toolkit of audio-drama. As Verma points out, 'in radio there is no *mise-en-scène* in the traditional meaning. Instead, what we think of as *mise-en-scène* obeys the logic of contingency and expectation, of hint and hallucination.' (Verma 2017a: 15) The engagement of the mind rather than sight, then, defines both the limits and the possibilities of audio-drama. Podcast drama, as a subset of audio-drama and equally invisible, must logically follow the same path as its predecessor, the radio, and utilise the same dramaturgical toolkit.

This conclusion is one that I aim to contest; I want to argue that the *theatre of the mind* is tied to the medium of radio, rather than to the general properties of the sense of hearing. Podcasts, which are encountered in a radically different manner by the listener, can therefore go beyond a dramaturgy that appeals to the mind.

The Theatre of the Mind and the Perception of the World

Examined closely, the *theatre of the mind* does not stand up to scrutiny. After all, if audio-drama is the theatre of the mind, what kind of theatre is actual *theatre*? If it is presumed that the listener understands worlds, dramatic or real, through her mind—that is, a process of intellectualisation and imagination that requires an active process in addition to what is experienced through senses—then why not label all visual forms of dramatisation with the same moniker? The idea, then, implies that there are two modes of encountering dramatic worlds: one, accessible through sight, is immediate and tangible without significant mental interjections, and the other, the purely auditory, requires a mediation from the mind in order to become perceptible. This dis-

tinction, however, is problematic on two counts: firstly, it is predicated on the notion that the sense of sight is somehow more immanent and integral to the experience of the world than the sense of hearing, and secondly, it assumes that it is possible to experience the world through mental processing, rather than bodily engagement. It is the latter problem that, as I shall argue in this section and the next, has the most bearing on podcast dramaturgy—however, let us first address the former briefly.

Discussions of the *theatre of the mind* usually involve an examination of the different powers of the senses, in which a bias toward visuals is present. Crisell, for example, argues that 'the ear is not the most "intelligent" of our sense organs' (Crisell 1994: 5), whereas 'our primary means of understanding or interpreting the world seems to be visual' (Crisell 1994: 8). Esslin claims that 'man is, above all, a creature of the eye and […] our minds automatically translate most information we receive into visual terms' (Esslin 1971: 5). Beck argues that the radio's auditory nature leads to 'considerable degradation of data' (Beck 1999: 1.4a). The sense of hearing, the argument goes, provides us with less information about the world, due to its ambiguity: while the eye sees objects as what and where they are, the sound of an object is somewhat detached from it; the sound of a car speeding could also be heard as the moo of a cow, or the roar of a broken trumpet, or a recording of the very sound of a car speeding, whereas the image of the same car does not open itself to this uncertainty. This binary distinction between the senses, however, can be questioned. Clive Cazeaux (2005) addresses this by shifting to a framework of phenomenology—the school of philosophy concerned with the nature of consciousness, which attempts to understand the experience of the world not by employing abstract, theoretical and reflective constructs– such as the concepts of mind, image, sense and thought—but by describing pre-reflective experience itself. The first-person experience of the world, Cazeaux argues by drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception, is primarily holistic, complete and synaesthetic: the world is experienced as a whole first, and the separation of sense experience into channels such as sight, hearing and touch requires deliberate, self-aware reflection; the sound of the speeding car, for example, is first heard not as a *sound* with multiple interpretations and requiring thought, but as the presence of a speeding car, a cow or a broken trumpet, within the context of experience before it can be divided reflectively into sounds, images (or lack thereof), and ideas. The world, in other words, is not primarily visual, but fundamentally experiential. As such, '[s]ound is not something that just happens to be emitted by our contact with objects, but part of the experiential fabric out of which the human being's engagement with the world is formed' (Cazeaux 2005: 162)—and sonic experience is

therefore just as immanent and immediate as vision. The ambiguities arising from the sensory qualities of sound are, according to Cazeaux, not problematic for the presentation of the dramatic world, but instead 'invitational' (2005: 164): they allow the listener to encounter the sounds of audio-drama 'as a coherent whole through a series of "beckonings" and "openings unto" relationships *with other elements in the work and with the elements in the world*' (Cazeaux 2005: 167), opening up the aesthetic possibilities of the world.

Cazeaux's engagement with phenomenology is brief, but it can be extended here to address and critique the second assumption of *the theatre of the mind*: from a phenomenological perspective, it is impossible to encounter the world through the mind alone; as Merleau-Ponty puts it, 'the unity of the world, before being posited by knowledge in a specific act of identification, is 'lived' as ready-made or already there' (2002: xix). In other words, for the mind to be able to reflect, process, and interpret distinct elements that it encounters, the world must already be there in its interconnected totality. One's encounter with the world 'is not "a state of consciousness", or a "mental fact", and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition […]' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 66). If the listener is to encounter the *here and now* of a coherent, holistic world—in other words, if she is to experience drama— then the sound structure of audio-drama cannot be understood as an abstract series of concepts, ideas and codes addressed to the mind and subject to its acts of identification, but should instead be seen as an address to *perception*, in its holistic, multisensory, interconnected totality. Audio-drama, in other words, cannot be thought into existence by the mind, but is simply *perceived* in a primordial, pre-reflective manner.

Let us pause and consider the significance of this point. As mentioned earlier, the conventions of radio dramaturgy—which are presumed to emanate from the unisensory nature of the medium and thus extendable to audio-drama—are geared toward appealing to the interpretive and deliberative mind, providing it with the necessary clarity to perform its acts of identification on sounds, so that it can reconstruct the dramatic world in the form in which it was created, however realistic or imaginative, by the writer and producer. If, however, the drama is not encountered through the mind, then why should audio-dramaturgy follow this tendency?

This question becomes even more important once we take into account the fact that for Merleau-Ponty, the site of pre-reflective experience of the world is *the body*. This does not mean that the body is a source of information *providing* consciousness with content, or that it is a biological *tool* with which sensations are received or generated, to be put into a coherent understanding of the world in the mind—the division between body and mind is,

for Merleau-Ponty, invalid; instead, experience fundamentally arises from the fact that one *is* a body: the world is *a world* to me because I have a bodily perspective on it. Here, 'the body' does not refer to the physical and biological descriptions of the human body as understood through science, physiology, or any kind of reflective comprehension, but to the pre-reflective, perceptual, experiential *lived body*: a primordial presence in the world, which makes perceptual experience possible through its pre-reflective abilities: looking, listening, moving, approaching, distancing, expressing and so on. Merleau-Ponty argues that such abilities constitute a *body schema*, which, as Taylor Carman explains, is 'the set of abiding noncognitive dispositions and capacities that orient, guide, and inform our bodily sensitivities and motor actions. […] Our bodily skills and dispositions carve out a perceptual world' (2008: 132–133).

One can question, therefore, why audio-dramaturgy should be formulated to address the deliberative, semantic mind, rather than the holistic perceptual experience of the body. After all, the ability of the body schema to form deliberate thoughts, reflections and projections—in other words, the *mind*—allows for a perspective wholly different from one experienced through the body schema's auditory capabilities. Unlike one's thoughts, the sounds that one hears have a direct, antepredicative relationship with the body: they resonate with it physically—not through meaning and reference, but with rhythm, tempo, mood, volume, and other qualities found in sound. In the dramaturgy of the *theatre of the mind* however, as described earlier, these properties of sound remain subject to the condition of representational clarity. While the units of meaning represented by sounds can be as ambiguous to the mind as required and, to repeat Verma's phrase, 'obeys the logic of contingency and expectation' (2017a: 15), the sonic structure itself is constructed artificially, so as to be as unambiguous as possible to the body's perceptual experience. If it is the perception of the body, rather than the deliberation of the mind, that is responsible for the experience of the world as Merleau-Ponty observes, then why should audio-dramaturgy not optimise the dramaturgical toolkit to address the body schema's auditory abilities in perceiving the dramatic world? Orienting the sonic structure of audio-drama primarily toward its mental significance is valid only if we assume that the auditory possibilities of the body schema are insufficient in accessing the world—a position that, as elucidated by Cazeaux, is untrue from a phenomenological viewpoint.

Interestingly, this exact point was made in the early years of radio drama by arguably its first theorist, Rudolf Arnheim, who writes:

> The most elementary aural effects […] do not consist in transmitting to us the meaning of the spoken word, or sounds which we know in actuality. The 'expressive characteristics' of sound affects us in a far more direct way, comprehensible without any experience by means of intensity, pitch, interval, rhythm and tempo, properties of sound which have very little to do with the objective meaning of the word or the sound. (Arnheim 1936: 29)

Interestingly, although Arnheim was hoping for an audio-dramaturgy based on these 'expressive characteristics', the dramaturgical conventions of *the theatre of the mind*, which were taking shape around the time on the radio, were indeed formulated toward preserving the objective meaning of the word or the sound. Arnheim himself was aware of this development, and blamed it on radio practitioners who 'do not possess this simple instinct for sensuous qualities of their raw material, whether it is that they are simply incompetent or that they think they are doing a service to the meaning of the word' (1936: 28).

I want to posit an alternative explanation for this development: that the tendency to understand radio as the *theatre of the mind* arises from the specific properties of the qualities of the encounter between the listener and the audio-drama as mediated through conventional modes of radio listenership. To do this, I return to the body schema's auditory abilities, arguing that the bodily mode of engagement with the medium of radio is more conducive to a focused, attentive listening attitude, which can be addressed through the conventions of radio drama. Podcasts, on the other hand, facilitate a radically different engagement with the body, opening the way to a more immersive sonic experience which could be exploited dramaturgically.

Perception of the World and the Listener's Ear

To understand how the body engages with the dramatic world of audio-drama in its various manifestations, one must first ask: how does the body encounter the world through sound? This is a question that could be answered phenomenologically. For Merleau-Ponty, experience of the world is characterised by being located in a totality, rather than comprising of individual elements; indeed, any individual thing of which one becomes conscious only appears in perception because of its relationship to all other things. 'The perceptual "something"', he contends, 'is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a field' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 4). It is this structure of *figure* and *ground* that, for Merleau-Ponty, underlies all experience of the world.

Such a structure can be observed in auditory experience, should one reflect phenomenologically on first-hand encounters with the world. Should I pause to reflect at any moment, I instantly notice that I am constantly surrounded by sounds; not only am I in the presence of constantly vibrating air, but the interior of my own body is never quiet. Silence, it seems, is theoretically impossible, as I am always immersed in sound. Yet, my usual sonic experience of the world is not of all that is audible, but specific sounds: the doorbell ringing, people speaking, and other sound *figures*. Other sounds, although audible, are not direct objects of perception, and could be said to be in the *ground*. In their exploration and classification of the everyday details of the experience of sounds, Augoyard and Torgue (2014) provide useful terminology with which to discuss this: they describe the ability to perceive some sounds out of the myriad of what is audible in terms of the two complementary *sonic effects* of 'asyndeton' and 'synecdoche'; the former is the 'deletion from the perception or memory of one or many sound elements in an audible whole' (2014: 26), while the latter is 'the ability to valorise one specific element [of the audible] through selection […] produced by simple acoustic vigilance, by the determination of a predominant functional criterion, or by adhesion to a cultural schema establishing a hierarchy' (2005: 123–124). The two processes work in tandem: what is differentiated can only be understood by what is omitted; the sound of the speeding car, for example, can instead be perceived as a cow if set against the ground of the sounds of a meadow, although the latter is under asyndeton. The body schema, then, has the ability to experience figure and ground—and therefore, the world—through its pre-reflective ability to perform asyndeton and synecdoche.

Importantly, the relationship between auditory figures and grounds is rather more complicated than, for instance, in visual experience. As Ross Brown points out 'unlike the eye, the ear has no mechanical way of focusing' (2011: 5), and thus auditory perception relies solely on asyndeton and synecdoche to distinguish between figure and ground. After all, my body permits me to control my field of vision to a great extent, by turning my head, closing my eyes, focusing more closely, and a variety of other means that allow for new figures and grounds to emerge; in other words, I have the ability to pick what, out of all that is visible, can appear in front of my eyes. Conversely, my ear encounters all that is audible at any one moment, and so my field of audition is shaped through changes in figure–ground relationships between the same temporal continuity of sounds. In this field, any changes in volume, intensity, pitch, tempo or length—the same 'expressive characteristics' discussed by Arnheim—can lead to a complete change in the structure of figures and grounds: a sudden loudness, competing frequencies, or even the disappearance of a hitherto-constant back-

ground noise can shift the figures of perception rapidly and beyond the immediate control of the listener. In short, no synecdoche or asyndeton is ever complete or stable. For Brown, therefore, the figures perceived through auditory attention are always subject to the interruptions of the ground—'actively "paid" or "given" attention is continuously tugged and grabbed by events in the heard environment […] Sound must therefore be understood as ontologically distracting.' (2011: 6). Auditory experience of the world, then, is in constant oscillation between *engagement* with the figures of attention and *distraction* caused by new figures emerging out of the ground.

Let us now explore what happens in applying this understanding of the auditory world to audio-drama. If the aim of audio-dramaturgy is to create the experience of a dramatic world through sound, then its primary tool is to present a field of sonic figures and grounds to the listener, so that the auditory possibilities of her body schema allow her to perceive them in their totality as a world. The sound structure of the audio-drama distinguishes between the figure and ground within all that could be audible in the dramatic world; key sounds are heard at higher volume and with clearer dynamics, facilitating synecdoche, while other sounds are either eliminated or reduced in asyndeton in order to shape the ground against which figures appear. The dramaturgical toolkit of audio-drama, then, must be found in the effects created through skilful manipulation of the figure–ground structure of its sounds.

In the practices of the *theatre of the mind*, however, the tendency is to conduct this manipulation on a conceptual and intellectual, rather than sonic and, following Arnheim, *expressive* manner. While the structures of figure and ground can, on a conceptual level, change constantly and rapidly, to quote Verma once more, through 'hint and hallucination' (2017a: 15), the sonic structure focuses solely on the sound figures of speech and recognisable, codified sound effects and music, with all else in asyndeton; this stable structure is developed and maintained through dramaturgical acts and processes. As explored before, however, the stability of the sonic figure–ground relationship is not typical of auditory experience; indeed, to preserve the focus on specific sounds which refer to intended object or concepts, the aforementioned expressive characteristics of sound would need to be limited, as they might cause a reconfiguration of figure–ground relationships which obscures or alters the meaning of said sounds. In other words, the *theatre of the mind* creates the sonic structure of its dramatic world by moving away from the replication of auditory experience—in short, by treating sound as though it is not sonic, but conceptual.

As I have previously argued, this form of sonic structuring is not *the* theoretically-inevitable form of audio-dramaturgy, as some have claimed. Let

us examine, however, a condition under which it might become necessary. If the listener encounters the dramatic world through the manipulations of the sonic figure–ground structures presented in the audio-drama, then she encounters this very structure, too, only through the auditory abilities of her body schema, as a figure within the perceptual structure of her own world, and similarly subject to the potential oscillation between distraction and attention. The dramaturgical manipulation of the sonic figure–ground relationships, then, does not necessarily translate into the perceptual experience of the same structure for the listener, as these relationships can be affected, disrupted or obscured by other figures and grounds in her field of auditory perception. This is not the case in visual forms of drama; a film director can frame a particular figure–ground relationship and present it to the viewer, who can take this as the sole content of her field of vision, whether by sitting in a dark cinema, or simply by looking at it and not any other visible thing. In contrast, an audio-dramaturg may set the characters' voices against musical accompaniments and a roaring sea that frequently obscures them, only for the listener to encounter it through her radio speakers, alongside the rest of all that is audible, which at any moment might become key figures of perception and create a different—and perhaps dramaturgically undesirable—experience of the dramatic world. In such a situation, the manipulation of figures and grounds is beyond the control of the dramaturg, and requires the listener to actively perform synecdoche on the sonic figures of the dramatic world, and asyndeton on the sounds of her own world; in fact, sonic complexity in the structure of the audio-drama would hinder, rather than facilitate, this process. A hypothetical strategy to counter this, then, may be to emphasise the stability of sound figures in order to allow the listener to focus and distinguish them from the ground of all that is audible—in other words, to structure a *theatre of the mind*.

Here, we finally have a theoretically valid justification for the dramaturgy of *the theatre of the mind*: it addresses the needs of the listener's active process of asyndeton and synecdoche by providing her with stable figures of sound against an otherwise unpredictable sonic background. This active process of listening, however, is only required if audio-drama is encountered merely as a part of all that is audible, competing for attention with other sonic figures emerging within the field of perception. If all other sounds fall silent and the listener encounters only the sonic structure of audio-drama without the distraction of what is audible but dramaturgically unintended, the need for active engagement in synecdoche and asyndeton is all but eliminated, and she is able to perceive the dramatic world based on the figure-ground relationships created and manipulated in the process of dramaturgy. Should the dramaturg have a great extent of control over the listener's auditory field, *the theatre of the mind* is no longer necessary.

We have arrived, therefore, at a point of radical variance between media: the level of dramaturgical control of the auditory field is not constant, nor is it somehow intrinsic to sonic experience; instead, it is determined by the sonic qualities of the listener's bodily encounter with it—for example, its fidelity, volume and location within the auditory field—which, in turn, are shaped by the medium that carries the audio-drama. A medium that projects audio-drama into the auditory field of the listener without filling it entirely would require the dramaturgical approaches of *the theatre of the mind*. Crucially, this is a property that has generally been associated with the conventions of listening to radio—which is why Crisell labels it a 'secondary medium' (1994: 162). The sounds of audio-drama emanate from the radio receiver or loudspeakers and are cast into the listener's space alongside all other sounds; the listener's body then has to direct itself toward the sound by performing asyndeton on all other sounds—a process that, as mentioned, is always subject to distortion and distraction. Furthermore, the radio listener's activities directly affect the experience of the sound: any movement around the space can change the volume of the sound and thus the figure–ground relationships, necessitating auditory reorientation, while simple actions such as washing up, driving, or even walking can cause a transformative disturbance in the auditory field. Moreover, the conventional radio listener has little control over when and how she encounters audio-drama, as programme schedules dictate the timing of the encounter; a moment's distraction may cause her to miss an important figure in the perceptual world that cannot be brought back, perhaps until the programme is repeated. Of course, a determined listener can alter her experience by changing the properties of the encounter—for example, by recording the drama, listening to it through headphones and ceasing other activities; this, however, would be an atypical use of the medium, and thus not the primary mode of listening to consider when devising dramaturgical methods for it. Overall, then, the conventional mode of bodily encounter with the radio demands the *theatre of the mind*. The implications of this point should be emphasised: the mode of dramaturgy that is generally assumed to emerge from the inherent properties of audio-drama has been revealed instead as arising from the qualities of *radio* drama.

Podcasts, on the other hand, engage the listener in a radically different way—to the extent that, as Richard Berry (2016) points out, it could be considered a new medium, sharing some aspects with radio but varying in others. Berry's thorough survey of a large amount of research into the two media reveals that unlike radio, podcast listeners select their schedule of listening, and have control over the flow of the audio-drama—in that they can pause, rewind, and repeat it—which allows them to be 'not only less distracted [than radio listeners] but also potentially more engaged in the experience' (Berry

2016: 12). Most importantly, podcasts are 'more often than not […] [listened to] using headphones' (Berry 2016: 13). There is no distance between the listener and the source of sound: the audio-drama is plugged directly into the listener's inner ear, obscuring most day-to-day sounds; it does not occur within the auditory field – it becomes the field itself. Therefore, the sounds and activities of the podcast listener's actual space have little effect on the figure-ground relationships created through the process of dramaturgy: the dramatic world of the podcast becomes the entire content of the listener's world—experienced through direct perceptual encounter within the auditory field, rather than through deliberative focus. Indeed, performance and theatre already make extensive use of this phenomenon; Brown highlights how recent trends in theatre '[have] been for the sphere of sound to close in on the personal space of individual audience member, even into the "intercranial" sonic space between the ears. *Headphone theatre* and *theatre in the total dark* have become subgenres of "immersive theatre"' (2016: 175). As Misha Myers argues in her discussion of audio walks—another form of headphone-mediated dramatic experience—the listener's physical space and movements can combine with the sounds in her ear, leading to the emergence of an entirely new bodily space in the phenomenal field of experience. Myers argues that the audio walk is 'a theatre of intersubjective listening that both closes the distance and extends touch between two subjects within an interior bodily space, as well as within a landscape' (Myers 2011: 80). In podcast drama, the same space can emerge out of the listener's encounter not with another subject, but with a holistic perceptual dramatic world. The dramaturgy of the *theatre of the mind*, then, becomes redundant: the audio-drama can be addressed not to the mind, but to the ear, the body and the world around it.

The Listener's Ear and Podcast Drama

Let us return to the question that began the chapter: what should this new form of audio-drama, the podcast, sound like? In what followed, I critiqued the argument that it should follow the conventions and assumptions of radio drama, highlighting that contrary to its common theoretical characterisation, such conventions stem not from the unisensory nature of audio-drama, but the specifications of the medium of radio; simultaneously, I pointed to the expressive characteristics of sound—which, in the hierarchy of the *theatre of the mind*, rank below meaningful reference—as a possible avenue to be explored. The question, however, still remains: what should podcast dramaturgy be like, if not radio?

I posit that the answer does indeed lie in radio's past—but not the heritage of established modes of radio practice that Verma cites. Instead, podcast dramaturgy can find its blueprint or paradigm in radio experiments that did not survive to become part of the paradigmatic assumptions, practices, and conventions of radio drama. Radio dramaturgy, after all, emerged not from theoretical conjecture about *the theatre of the mind*, but out of a historical process: much like the podcast, the early year of the form in the 1920s was an era of experimentation. An unsigned 1928 article in the *BBC Handbook*—the corporation's public bulletin—indicates that 'the ends and forms of the new art of Radio Drama are hardly yet in sight' (1928: 116), and that 'the question of adapting and presenting [dramatic] material in that form which renders it capable of reception and appreciation by the listener' (1928: 115) continued to be explored. Interestingly, six short years later, the bulletin—now entitled the *BBC Yearbook*—argued that 'the first phase of development of radio drama has come to an end. The [...] special technique of presenting drama through the medium of the microphone has now crystallised as far [...] as its fundamentals are concerned' (1934: 57). Crisell's brief exploration of radio history (2000) characterises the interval between these two points as the period in which radio dramaturgs gradually became aware of what the possibilities and the limitations of the medium were, and adjusted their processes accordingly: they 'rediscover[ed] the verbal nature of drama' (Crisell 2000: 469), and discovered that 'mostly and primarily through speech, sound on the radio will tell us all the things we need to know' (Crisell 2000: 467)—in other words, the dramaturgy of the *theatre of the mind* took shape. Crisell, of course, ascribes this outcome to the intrinsic qualities of 'a sound-only medium' (2000: 471)—a position that has been critiqued extensively in this chapter. Should we consider, however, that these experiments may have ceased due to their incompatibility with the qualities of the medium of *radio*, perhaps returning to them through the new medium of the podcast can provide the opportunity for a productive revival.

A look back at the history of British radio, for example, reveals one such dramaturgical approach that did not survive the experimental era: the work of radio pioneer Lance Sieveking, whose treatise on radio drama, *The Stuff of Radio* (1934) understands the medium as a predominantly acoustic—and musical—medium, rather than a *writer*'s medium. He proudly declares his play *Kaleidoscope* (1927) to be 'the epitome of the radio play: there is nothing to print!' (1934: 29) and is doubtful about publishing his scripts at all: 'a radio play being prepared for reading demands [...] that all the sound sequences shall be so described that nothing essential shall be lost. To do this completely

is, I believe, an impossibility' (1934: 27). When discussing sound effects, he describes how the mixing of a variety of sound create a whole scene, and describes the mix not in terms of symbol and signification, but in terms of music: 'the exact *rightness* of its timing is everything […] and this is not achieved with clocks, but with an instinct similar to a musician's' (1934: 39). Even the written scripts of his productions describe the sounds in expressive, rather than meaningful terms; his *Arrest in Africa* (1930), for instance, contains lines such as '*like a great wave gathering itself to its greatest height before it topples over and crashes on the beach, the howling, hooting, screaming, roaring jungle hovers, spreads, swoops, and in one final, deafening shudder, overwhelms the young men, and they are swallowed up*' (Sieveking 1934: 185). The stuff of Sieveking's radio dramaturgy, in short, was directed toward the ear, and not the mind.

This dramaturgical approach, however, did not continue past the experimental period. As a *Sunday Express* review remarked at the time, 'Most people hate [the experiments]. They are too bothersome for the ordinary listener' (Sieveking 1934: 404); one can hypothesise that the expressive characteristics of this mode of dramaturgy would have made it difficult for the early listener to grasp the dramatic world through the—still rather technologically basic—radio. Indeed, Sieveking advises his listener to listen to his work in silence, sitting still and in darkness (1934: 97)—a strategy to maximise control over the auditory field, but one which is atypical of the medium, and which would nevertheless be unsuccessful, as there still exists a physical and aural distance between the listener and the source of sound; thus, the sounds of the dramatic world would form only part of the auditory field. The listener would encounter Sieveking's musical combination of multiple sounds from a single point, and with acts of asyndeton and synecdoche as her only means of separating them from each other, and from the other sounds around her. There is also the matter of the theatrical sound of the day to consider: as Brown notes, 'whereas in the mid nineteenth-century, every theatrical moment had been filled with noise, sound and music, with scarcely a panting beat between verbal salvo or musical set-piece, the dawn of the twentieth-century saw dramatists actively seeking settings for their dramas where silence *was*' (2010: 77). Both the producers and listeners of radio drama, then, derived their knowledge of how drama should sound from the British stage, which in the preceding few decades had moved from the noisy and musical soundscapes of melodrama, and toward the quiet contemplation of the Shavian *drama of ideas*—itself a form of a *theatre of the mind*.

With the advent of podcast drama, however, a space has opened up for a return to such practices. The podcast dramaturg, exercising significant control over the listener's auditory field, can utilise the expressive characteristics of

sound without compromising the listener's perceptual experience of the world. Furthermore, the listener, by virtue of seeking and obtaining the podcast and scheduling listening time, has already indicated that she is willing to listen to these experiments. Val Gielgud, the head of BBC Radio Drama during the experimental years, lamented in his reflections:

> It was the worst of luck for Sieveking that there was never an experimental laboratory available for British Broadcasting. […] Experimental programmes had to be found a place in normal programme hours, and 'tried out' upon a patient, but necessarily largely uncomprehending public. And there was not infrequent expression of resentment that producers should apparently be learning their business at listeners' expense. (1957: 26)

The podcast listener, both by virtue of being a willing participant and through the specific mode of bodily engagement with the medium, is neither resenting, nor uncomprehending. Indeed, even niche interest such as soundscapes, comedy horror and 1940s American drama and variety radio can find a home, and an eager audience, in podcasts such as *Soundscape* (Harris and Harris 2015), *Welcome to Night Vale* (Night Vale Presents 2017), and *The Thrilling Adventure Hour* (Workjuice Corp 2014), respectively. In addition, the role of sound in drama, theatre and performance has become ever more prominent: from audio walks by the likes of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller to the experimental sounds of post-dramatic theatre,[2] and from the designed soundscape of horror films to various strands of sound art, radio dramaturgs and their audiences have access to wide range of aesthetic references and practices in sound. Podcast drama, then, provides the ultimate experimental laboratory in which follow Sieveking's lead away from conventional radio dramaturgy and toward more holistic, expressive, and musical forms, closer to the structures of bodily audition than mental interpretation. Whereas radio was the *theatre of the mind*, podcasts can move past the theoretical separation of body and mind, and become the theatre *in* the body.

Notes

1. The coining of the term is ascribed to BBC journalist Ben Hammersley (Berry 2016: 17).
2. For more on this topic, see Ovadija's (2013) survey of the role of sound in avant-garde theatre.

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