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Constellation - Dispersal - Association

LIGNA

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"The more space and time are mastered, the less readily one can identify their masters." Siegfried Kracauer

Radio is today a medium we have gotten into the habit of underestimating in many ways. It's become little more than background noise. While television still retains the power to spark controversy, not much attention is devoted to the qualities and implications of radio. This presents an interesting opportunity for stealthily appropriating this neglected medium to make possible new and unpredictable situations.
Thanks to the attentiveness of a few intellectual spirits, some of the original scenes involving radio were recorded in the late twenties, shortly after its inception and spread as a mass medium. These scenarios serve to remind us of the basic conditions necessary for an appropriation of radio - as well as of its intrinsic limitations. Based on two such scenes, the following will present the constellation of listeners and the dispersal of the voice as the key radio motifs that cannot be mastered, in light of which we will undertake a re-reading of the radio theory postulated by Bertolt Brecht.

1st Scene. Constellation. The Evening of an Election Day.

"Since all of the special correspondents sent here from abroad were busy reporting to their newspapers back home about the election-day fever that had broken out here in Berlin, I decided to venture out myself on the evening of Election Day and take a reading of the public temperature," Siegfried Kracauer begins in his brief report for the **Frankfurter Zeitung**. The journalist goes out onto the street to give an eyewitness account of what's happening there. March 1932: the situation on the street was usually tense, with street battles likely to break out at any moment, so that surely something could be expected to happen on Election Day - even if only a clash of hot tempers. But, to Kracauer's surprise, the day ran its course in relative peace, "only on the advertising pillars did the battle continue to rage. There, one could see red National Socialist signs stuck over the mouths of Thälmann and Düsterberg, as if to forcibly prevent these two from having their say." The feature writer continues onward toward Berlin's wide-open public squares to see what will develop there once the polls have closed. Will the battle on paper be carried on into the public realm?

"Across from the ‘Kaufhaus des Westens' department store a white projection surface had been set up in the middle of the square, before which, however, only a few people were standing." In previous years the crowds of people collecting in front of this type of election announcement had grown larger and larger. They formed groups that indulged in vehement debates - and were capable of springing into action at any moment by virtue of the fact that they were out on the street. Only in the streets did these diverse individuals make up an aggregate public whose reactions could not be predicted. But by 1932 this spirit seems conspicuously

absent; an "abnormally low temperature" reigns in the public space. Berlin seems much emptier and colder than it normally is in March.

Kracauer ends his precise observations with a search for the reasons behind this situation. Perhaps people are afraid of violent confrontations? No: "A more likely explanation is (...) that most people are staying home to listen to the election results with their families. The radio is at fault for the abandonment of the public space. At a time when politics has penetrated from citizens' homes out onto the street, at decisive moments like these, radio is driving them back into their living rooms again." Radio dispels Kracauer's hope for the politicization of the street, which one might have presumed would be the reaction to the dawn of a revolutionary movement. With the masses, a new public had emerged, which was perhaps not vital in and of itself, but which could at vital junctures politicize the street. But radio stops this possibility dead in its tracks before it's able to make historical inroads. The constellation of listeners sitting at home partaking separately in the public-ness of the program, who represent a kind of dispersed public, appears unable to take concerted action and is thus meaningless as a political factor. The family listens to the voting results being broadcast from the polls, maybe discusses them a bit, but, just like the voice coming out of the radio, their reactions are bounded by their own four walls. Even if the consciousness of the listeners is changing, this has no direct political impact. Just one year later, the National Socialists will march through the deserted public spaces with their parades and torchlight processions, while the masses passively follow the events at home, learning from the radio how the political landscape has changed.

2nd scene: Dispersal. Spectral Voices and Radio on the Street.

Intellectual Günther Stern also stepped out onto the street at the end of the twenties. But this street wasn't eerily deserted; it was instead filled with spooky voices: "It was radio that first radically destroyed the spatial neutrality attributed to music. You leave your home, the music from the speakers still echoing in your ears; you are inside it - it is nowhere. You take ten steps and hear the same music coming from your neighbor's house. Since music is here as well, the music is both here and there, localized and planted in space like two stakes. But they are both the same music: over here X is continuing along with the same song he started singing back there. You walk on - as you reach the third house, X keeps on singing, accompanied by the second X, with muted background vocals courtesy of X in the first house. What makes this so shocking?"

Stern notices how the voices in the radio leak out of the houses. The deserted public space takes on a macabre quality through these "duplicate voices," because all of them are sounding simultaneously, all asserting the same claim to being the one authentic voice. This is the underlying *s*hock** of ubiquity that radio evokes for music-lover Stern. For him, radio is an uncanny medium that forces "the human being" to decide whether just to ignore the phenomenon or to "avow" the "duplicate voices," with the danger, however, of thereby becoming "himself inhuman."

What Stern perceives as an eerie phenomenon can be explained by the basic technical conditions inherent in radio: the distribution of the voice and its dispersal from one station to an indeterminate number of end devices. The peculiar materiality of the broadcast voice comes from the fact that it is only ever heard in plural form. Therein lies its threat for "the human being," whom Stern always puts in the singular, as opposed to the plurality of the identical

duplicate voices. Any attempt at an appropriation of this "outgrowth," this "immoderation," is doomed to fail, for it would necessarily be turned against the subject of the appropriation and would end up dragging it along into the spectral realm of technology. Once there, its voice would be dispersed again into the uncanny public space of radio.

3rd Perspective. Association. Listeners Unite.

Thus we have sketched two original scenes from the history of radio that evoke its uncanny qualities: the listeners in their dispersed constellation and the voice dispersed identically among many different receivers. These two scenes evoke the abandonment of public space and the haunting of the resultant emptiness by doubles and ghosts. Left-wing media criticism seems to have found this dispersal similarly strange - and to have viewed it above all as nothing but a problem. This probably explains why the opportunities for distribution offered by radio were to a large extent ignored in the course of the numerous attempts to appropriate the medium - from Brecht's suggestions and their reception by Enzensberger, to Radio Alice, to Geert Lovink's model for sovereign media. Or, alternatively - thanks to Brecht - distribution was regarded instead as a drawback that must somehow be overcome: "The broadcasting system must be changed from a distribution system into a communication apparatus." Hence, the inherent potential for ghostly distribution - the creation of a dispersed public and a more than mere acoustic transformation of spaces and situations - is ruled out, although this is a potential for which radio is uniquely suited among the media. But how, then, can this potential be appropriated? Although it may not seem so at first glance, this is just the question Brecht

poses in his "Radio Theory." He remarks in his essay on how the presence of radio receivers changes public spaces, qualifying this observation however with the comment, "but it cannot be the main task of radio to also place receivers under bridges," and going on to assert the above-cited demand that radio be transformed into an apparatus for communication. The kind of radio communication Brecht meant is usually taken to consist of an "interaction" between transmitter and receiver, thus not taking into account the peculiar constellation of the many listeners. Brecht's explanation seems to acknowledge this: radio is "purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out." Only a major change could transform this distributive sharing-out into a two-way communication.

But is this really what Brecht is asking for? Because he goes on to say that radio is already fulfilling this function of conveying information: "The task of radio is not limited to the mere repetition of reports." Brecht is not interested in communication in the sense of interaction, but rather in transforming distribution itself, in understanding it as a form of communication. The technical apparatus need not be transformed, according to Enzensberger's reading, but instead the function of supply. It should not simply be used to "prettify public life," but must in its function *as* a supply medium be able to transform the situation of the listener and, as Brecht notes elsewhere, to realize "his mobilization and redrafting as a producer." Brecht's theory is not motivated by a desire to devalue radio, but consists instead of a critique on the prevailing use of the medium, in which the possibilities of distribution are not being adequately exploited.

The contemporary relevance of his analysis can be found in the fact that, unlike Kracauer and Stern, Brecht does not blame the rise of radio for the decline of a public culture, but instead perceives for the first time the opportunity provided by radio to "relate" listeners

to one another in a kind of aggregate constellation, i.e. to organize them into a free-form association.
Interpreted in this way, the real task of a left-wing appropriation of radio would by no means consist of an inversion of the medium, which could after all be understood only as a self-contained act: an act that always remains a future projection, that never actually begins. Instead, the task is to embark upon an appropriation of the medium that heeds the fundamental condition of the spectral nature of distribution. This appropriation would be open-ended, allowing for the development of models that would test the medium over and over again to discern what possibilities it might offer. In which situations might radio intervene? What kind of political impact might the dispersed public represented by the listeners be able to exercise? How can the constellation of listeners be transformed into an independent, politically effective association? In the course of searching for answers to such questions, hitherto unforeseen practices connected with the use of radio could evolve.

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